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THE THOUGHTS, PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES  
OF TWELVE YEAR 5 AND 6 MALE WRITERS AT A NEW ZEALAND  
PRIMARY SCHOOL

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation sought to investigate the thoughts, experiences, actions and responses of twelve boys from a New Zealand primary school to the act of writing. The gap in achievement levels within the area of writing between boys and girls has been well documented. Research and recommendations have been made to narrow this gap and to understand, address and improve the complex issue of boys and their writing. However, recent evidence suggests this remains an issue. Therefore, the voices of twelve male writers between the ages of nine and eleven were sought to investigate the research question; “What are the thoughts, perceptions and experiences of twelve Year 5 and 6 boys as writers?”

A variety of qualitative methods were used in this research project, including individual interviews, group discussions, participant observations and writing sessions. These were conducted at a New Zealand primary school over a five-week period. This study found that the boys placed considerable emphasis on the freedom, choice and ownership of the writing topics and content. The writing of stories and the social world of writing were also valued by these male writers. This study also identified differences between official writing, in the form of the school based curriculum writing, and the unofficial writing world of boys’ story writing. Furthermore, gender stereotypes and constructs were evident in boys’ perceptions of writing. Finally, the boys placed emphasis on the role of spelling and punctuation and the quantity of writing output.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Writing is more than the mere mark of a pen on paper or the tap of the keyboard. Writing is the communication of meaning, thoughts and ideas, and provides a vehicle to explore and develop one's identity, relationships with others, and to participate in one's community and culture (Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1968; Smith & Elley, 1997). Learning to write and writing to learn are crucial skills for 21st century children. Writing is also a pivotal skill needed to navigate all curriculum learning areas within a school context (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2006).

Despite the importance of writing, some students are struggling with learning to write. Within the current New Zealand context almost one in three Year 5-8 students are faced with challenges when it comes to writing and boys tend to feature more predominantly than girls in this particular cohort (University of Auckland, 2017). This disparity between the achievement levels in writing between boys and girls has previously been identified within the New Zealand context (Cuttance & Thompson, 2008; Gadd, 2014; Hawthorne, 2008; Hood, 2000) and internationally (Alloway & Gilbert, 2002; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2009). Numerous studies, reviews, critiques and articles concerning boys and their literacy have been published (e.g., Knowles & Smith, 2005; Marsh, 2003; Martino, 1995, 2001, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Smith & Wilhem, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). The aim of this research was to better understand the complex issue of boys and writing.

Many of the dominant discourses on raising writing achievement levels for all students focus on teachers, for example, the characteristics of effective teachers and their pedagogy within the classroom context (Gadd, 2014; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Parr & McNaughton, 2014). This is somewhat influenced by teacher effectiveness research undertaken by Hattie (2003, 2012) and

Alton-Lee (2003). I contend that the voices of the boys of the boys themselves are important and that the use of student voice or the child's perspective (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Smith, 2013) is essential to elucidate and understand the complexities and contradictions inherent in this issue. Therefore, this qualitative research investigation is driven by the desire to hear the voices and perspectives of boys as writers.

Writing research (in comparison to reading) is somewhat neglected and underrepresented (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Hodges, Feng, Kuo & McTigue, 2016; University of Auckland, 2017), as are the writing experiences of boys between the ages of ten and twelve (in comparison to secondary students) (Gadd, 2014). This dissertation aims to help address this gap by exploring the issues that boys from a New Zealand primary school confront, their thoughts, experiences, actions and responses to the act of writing. The main participants in this study are twelve male students between the ages of nine and eleven who possess varying writing abilities. The auxiliary participants are four teachers, two males and two females, who provide their perspectives on the teaching of writing and how they encourage effective learning strategies.

## **1.1 Background**

The impetus for this research study grew over the past six years from my experiences as a female primary school teacher at a New Zealand primary school. As a classroom practitioner, I have noticed reluctant boy writers and wanted to understand the challenges they faced and what might motivate them to write effectively. My goal was to improve my own pedagogical practices in order to become a better teacher of writing. I soon realised I was not alone in my concern about boys and their writing. Boys and writing was an issue for teachers, parents, researchers, and the media alike - from contentions regarding the over feminisation of the education system, to the call for boys only classes, and the criticism that the teaching of literacy is failing boys (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Cuttance & Thompson, 2008; Hoff-Sommers, 2000; Martino, 2003; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Maynard & Lowe, 1999; Skelton & Francis, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009).

Boys were being described as the new disadvantaged (Teese, Davies, Charlton & Polesel, 1995), the new losers, or victims in the so called ‘war on boys’ (Hoff-Sommers, 2000). Towards the end of last century this ‘war’ was seen by some as a direct product of the feminisation of the teaching profession (Biddulph, 1995; Moir & Moir, 1999). This view also has currency in New Zealand, as evident from headlines and editorials such as *Boys are Failing, and Feminism is at Fault* (Law, 2009).

Hoff-Sommers (2000) argued that the statistical dominance of female teachers over male teachers within the primary school sector resulted in the feminisation of the teaching profession. This was considered to directly favour girls and girls’ learning styles over those of boys in the primary school context (Biddulph, 1997; Hoff-Sommers, 2000). The blame for boys’ underachievement compared to that of girls has led to a seemingly simple solution being proposed, namely, that more male teachers are needed. Implicitly, the argument is that if there were more males employed in the primary sector then the feminised teaching practices, which are alleged to advance girls and hinder boys, will be counterbalanced (Biddulph, 1998; Hoff-Sommers, 2000). More recently, a similar line of argument has been put forward by the media with such headlines as *Lack of Male Teachers Affecting Boys* (Jones, 2014), *A Threatened Species the Male Teacher* (Madge, 2014), and *Wanted More Male Teachers* (Crayton-Brown, 2015).

Within the New Zealand context, in 2015 the total number of female teachers in state and state integrated schools was 35,249 compared to 12,162 male teachers. Clearly, females dominate the teaching profession. However, the number of female principals in state and state integrated schools was 1,173 compared to 1,207 male principals (Education Counts, 2017). Although female teachers clearly outnumber men in the classroom and make up a larger percentage of the teaching workforce, there are fewer woman in positions of power and control or policy making such as the role of principal.



Hattie (2003) claims teacher knowledge, actions and values account for approximately 30% of student achievement: “It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation” (Hattie, 2003, p. 2). One could conclude that this relates not so much to the gender of the teacher but to the effectiveness of the teaching. The impact of teacher effectiveness on the learner has been at the fore of much educational research (Hattie 2003, 2012) and a number of seminal research projects, including the *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis* (Alton-Lee, 2003), have influenced the teaching and learning of writing. These have also impacted upon New Zealand governmental policy with publications that focus on the role of the teacher and pedagogical knowledge, including *Effective Literacy Practice Years 5-8*, (MOE, 2006), *The Literacy Learning Progressions* (MOE, 2010) and on-line resources via *Te Kete Ipurangi* (MOE, n.d).

This focus on teacher effectiveness is also apparent in the United States. Gilbert and Graham’s (2010) national survey of writing in the United States concluded that an in-depth focus on teacher effectiveness was a necessary step for raising writing achievement levels.

Although teacher effectiveness in relation to writing focuses on a myriad of factors, including the interaction of the teacher and learner, building relationships, conferencing, identifying learning goals, giving feedback, integration of topic, and lesson design and duration (Glasswell, Parr & McNaughton, 2003; Parr & McNaughton, 2014). I contend that we need to hear the lived realities and perspectives of 21<sup>st</sup> century boy writers in the search to become more effective teachers of writing. Gaining an understanding of what they experience, what they say and what they think is a step towards better understanding effective writing pedagogy for boys.

The act of writing within classroom literacy programmes is often seen as being in opposition to the construct of masculinity and therefore it is contended that boys view writing as being feminised (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Martino 1995; Newkirk, 2000). This, in turn, may mean that some boys

perceive literacy as having little real value for them. Other researchers suggest that writing topics often given to children in primary schooling are concerned with emotional expression, which may be perceived as a feminine area and therefore may interest boys less (Rowan et al., 2002).

From my direct personal experience over the past six years as a classroom teacher, I have also noticed some motivated and passionate boy writers who are always excited and eager to share their writing with a friend, the class or myself. They wanted their thoughts, stories, identities, realities, opinions and perceptions of the world to be heard. I have wondered what these 21<sup>st</sup> century boy writers could teach the teacher or indeed each other.

To better understand the issues confronting male writers, I decided to look closer at middle school male students in my own micro context, a New Zealand primary school, and in particular, the National Standard results. National Standards were introduced into New Zealand in 2010 for Years 1 to 8. It is a legal requirement for all teachers to report student progress in reference to a National Standard benchmark twice yearly (McDowell, 2015; Parr & Jesson, 2015). The National Standard criteria requires the teacher to make an Overall Teacher Judgement (OTJ) on where the child best fits within the standard according to the following criteria, 'above', 'at', 'below' or 'well below'. OTJ is the current New Zealand standardised assessment criteria based on the triangulation of data by teachers, including writing samples, observations and assessment tools such as Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning in writing (asTTle) (MOE, 2003). AsTTle is an online assessment tool designed to measure students' progress in writing and to assist teachers to assess students' writing against set criteria (MOE, n.d).

Within the micro-context of the New Zealand primary school where I was teaching, the National Standard data (MOE, 2010) at the end of 2015, based on OTJ for Year 5 children, showed that 5 % of girls were below National Standard in Writing compared to 20 % of boys. Furthermore, for Year 4 children, 22 % of girls were below the National Standard in Writing compared with

36 % of boys. In both year groups, boys featured in greater numbers in the below National Standards in Writing data. The wider New Zealand context also demonstrated that the achievement levels in writing for boys and girls showed this same trend of greater numbers of boys than girls being below National Standard in Writing. In 2015, overall New Zealand National Standard data based on gender indicated that 79.4 % of girls were achieving at or above the National Standard in Writing compared to 63.9 % of boys (Education Counts, 2016). Girls were achieving higher results than boys. Cuttance and Thomson (2008) state: "There is converging evidence that girls perform better than boys, across all ethnic groupings, on all measures of reading and writing at all levels of schooling" p. 4). Hood (2000) also expressed his concerns regarding boys' writing outcomes in his influential handbook for teachers, *Left to Write Too* (2000). Hood recommended that male literacy practice be investigated further.

It appears that this gap between girls' and boys' achievement in writing is not peculiar to the New Zealand context. Since the 1990s, there has been considerable research into boys and literacy which has helped inform gender education policies (Mills, Francis & Skelton, 2009). Alloway et al. (2002) investigated the issue and found there were differences in literacy achievement levels between the genders, especially in the field of writing. In 1996, the Australian national literacy test demonstrated a gender gap in Year 3 national writing performance. Eighty-one percent of female students were achieving at or above the national writing benchmark compared to 65 % of boys (Rowan et al., 2002).

In England, the issue of the underachievement of boys in writing remains a concern. The United Kingdom's Department of Education (2012) report *What is the Research Evidence on Writing?* stated that at primary school level, "girls outperform boys in all subjects, but the biggest gap (10 percentage points) is in writing" (p. 34). Research on gender differences in Canada resulted in the Ontario Ministry of Education issuing a publication, *Me Read? No way!* (2006), as a resource for teachers to improve their teaching of boys. In the United States, boys trailed behind girls in their writing results according to National Assessment of Educational Progress scores

(Weaver-Hightower, 2009). It also appears that writing is not a popular subject for boys. In 1985, Elley investigated 75 classrooms in Canterbury, New Zealand and boys ranked writing sixth out of seven subjects in terms of interest and popularity (Smith & Elley, 1997). More recently, the United Kingdom Department of Education (2012) found that girls enjoyed writing more than boys. In Finland, Merisuo-Storm (2006) found similar results, as did Hansen (2001) in the New Zealand context, and Graham, Berninger and Fan (2007) in the United States.

As a current primary school classroom teacher, I believe it is important to investigate why this disparity exists. Steps have been taken internationally to investigate the issue and recommendations have been made to narrow this gap (Alloway et al., 2002; Knowles & Smith, 2005; Marsh, 2003; Martino, 1995, 2001, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Smith & Wilhem, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). The evidence from these recent studies suggests that the disparity remains an issue. The United Kingdom's Department of Education's *Early Years Foundation* (2016) statistics indicated that the gap between boys and girls within the area of writing level achievements was the largest of all learning areas (United Kingdom Department of Education, 2016). The United States Department of Education's National Centre for Education Statistics (2012) results for writing found that performance at both Grade 8 and Grade 12 showed that girls achieved higher results in writing at both levels than boys in 2011 (United States Department of Education, 2012). The Australian National Assessment Programme 2011 assessment results in the field of writing indicated that girls perform better than boys in Year 5 in all areas including persuasive writing, spelling and grammar, and punctuation (Australian Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013). Although steps have been made to narrow the gap, one can conclude that the issue has not yet been fully resolved.

I believe the experiences and perceptions of twelve boy writers of varying writing levels will provide some insights into this issue. Many researchers have advocated for the use of children's 'voice' in order to understand how children make sense of their social reality and learning

(Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Prout, 2005; Smith, 2013). There is an agreement that researchers and educationalists need “new ways of representing, seeing and understanding children and childhood” (Prout, 2005, p. 3). This is supported by Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) which stipulates the right of children to freely express their views in matters concerning them. This refers, at least to some extent, to the child’s right to express their views regarding how they learn within an educational context. Researchers need to investigate and incorporate the child’s perspective: “A missing part of the puzzle has been the understanding of childhood from the point of view of the children” (Smith, 2013, p. 9). This research aims to explore what and how boys think about their writing by listening, speaking, watching, and writing with them.

## **1.2 Thesis Structure**

The first part of this opening chapter has addressed the need for further research and understanding of the topic of boys and writing in order to address some complexities surrounding the disparity between outcomes in writing between boys and girls. Chapter Two will expand on this theme by reviewing the literature surrounding writing and boys that is relevant to this research topic. Chapter Three will explain the methodology used in this study, including the data collection and analysis process. In Chapter Four, the findings will be reported. Chapter Five will draw conclusions, outline the limitations of this study, discuss implications for practice and suggest areas for further research.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

This chapter reviews the literature surrounding boys and writing. It begins with an exploration of the meaning and purpose of writing, and the theoretical background that surrounds the teaching and learning of writing within the context of this study. Some historic approaches towards the teaching of writing and recent research on writing within the New Zealand and international contexts are reviewed and critiqued. Theories relating to literacy and boys will be discussed in relation to concepts of masculinity and the role of new literacies. Studies relating to ownership, enjoyment and finally student voice will also be reported.

### **2.1 Why do we Write?**

Writing occurs for a number of reasons: to entertain, to record events, to explain, to persuade, respond, hypothesise, inform, research, comment or reflect (MOE, 1996). Within all of these writing contexts, the overarching concept is that a form of communication of thoughts and ideas has occurred and therefore meaning has been created. This meaning is transferred onto paper or a digital device using a series of shared formalities or conventions reflected in word sequencing, spelling, grammar and layout (Smith & Elley, 1997). According to Fischer (2001), the purpose of writing is to communicate through the use of “artificial graphic marks on a durable or electronic surface” (p. 12). Simply put, writing is the communication of thoughts and ideas in the creation of meaning. Indeed, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE, 2007), the governing document that guides the teaching and learning of writing in New Zealand schooling, defines ‘writing’ under the category of ‘making meaning’ (MOE, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, it is necessary to explore how shared meaning is created. This is done in the following section.

## **2.2 Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural theory is a subset of socio-constructivism and is the broad theoretical framework that underpins the teaching of literacy within the New Zealand context (Turner, Chapman, Greaney, Prochnow & Arrow, 2013). A sociocultural or constructivist theory asserts that humans construct their understanding of the world within a social, historic and cultural context (Blurr, 1995). According to this theory, knowledge is not a product, but an understanding of the world which is socially constructed through human interactions.

Blurr (1995) contends that people are born into an existing conceptual framework that defines and provides the context of their reality. With the understanding that knowledge and our reality are constructed by our social, cultural and historic contexts comes the role of language. Social constructivist theorists Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Vygotsky (1962) maintain that language precedes thought and that the way people think, their conceptual understanding, knowledge and definitions of their reality are provided by the language used in a shared cultural context. Vygotsky (1962) stated, “thought development is determined by language” (p. 51).

Social constructivism regards language as a “form of social action” (Blurr, 1995, p. 7) and is more complex than simply expressing oneself. Language is viewed both as a window into how children’s realities are constructed as well as a lens through which social frameworks are constructed and perpetuated. As such, writing is a means of conveying thought and ideas, and, as stated above, any thought is a pre-condition to language, which in turn is based in social action. A thought, an idea, or a mark cannot occur in isolation from one’s social, cultural and historical reality, which is determined through language. In summary, in sociocultural theory writing is not viewed as an isolated cognitive experience, but rather as a social or cultural activity formed through our interactions with others.

### **2.3 A Brief History of the Teaching of Writing**

The teaching of writing within the school context has changed throughout time, from the early 20th century when writing focused on penmanship and placed emphasis on improving one's handwriting and presentation above content (Hawkins & Razali, 2012), to the new literacies of the 21st century. Some significant movements in the teaching and learning of writing have occurred over the past one hundred years that have implications and relevance to the teaching and learning of writing today (Alloway et al., 2002). During the 1950s there was a significant focus on 'writing as product'. Here the emphasis was placed upon spelling and grammar through teacher directed lessons and sentence correction exercises (Heenan, 1986).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the movement known as 'process writing' rapidly gained in popularity, with its child-centred approach. This movement aimed at creating authenticity in writing by employing the methods and approaches used by published authors (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Heenan, 1986; Murray, 1968). The process writing approach engaged the writer in planning, drafting, revising, conferencing and publishing, and was greatly influenced by the writing of Donald Graves, whose publication *Writers: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983) had significant impact on the teaching and learning of writing in New Zealand, Australia and the United States. Graves' philosophy of writing assumed that children want to write.

The 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century saw a swing back from process writing to the measurable levels of achievement, genre debates and skills based lessons. Criticism was directed at New Zealand teachers' delivery of process writing, with claims made that it had limited benefits for New Zealand children (Hood, 2000).

Current literacy research within the New Zealand education system is influenced by Freebody and Luke's (1990) four resources model that advocates a balanced approach to literacy education and outlines four interconnected stages to become an effective literacy learner. These stages include "code-breaker" which are those skills associated with alphabet, sounds, spelling,



conventions and patterns of the text. The “text participant” considers the meaning the writer brings to the text, such as their prior knowledge or cultural social practices. The “text user” explores the purpose of the text and the “text analyst” explores literacy with a critical eye (Freebody & Luke, 1990). This approach is employed and illustrated by the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s Literacy Online *Te Kete Ipurangi* (TKI) website that states: “To be successfully literate, students need to master three key areas of reading and writing: learning the code, making meaning, and thinking critically” (MOE, n.d).

## **2.4 New Zealand Research into Writing**

There have been a number of recent research studies within the New Zealand context that focus on achievement outcomes for students within the curriculum area of writing. The majority of these focus on the effectiveness of the teacher, teaching content and strategies (McDowell, 2015). Limbrick’s (2008) research focused on developing teachers’ ability to analyse writing samples as a means to improve writing pedagogy. Hawe and Parr (2014) focused on the concept of feedback via a constructed observational tool. Locke, Cawkwell and Sila’ila’i (2009) investigated effective teaching of literacy within a multicultural classroom.

Research studies within the New Zealand context vary in their methodological approach from case studies to national surveys. They also vary in relation to the age levels investigated, and themes from feedback to reading and writing links (Parr & Jesson, 2015). However, many share a common focus in that teachers were the centre of the inquiry. For example, Dix & Cawkwell (2011) investigated the influence of the teacher on the writer and Parr and McNaughton (2014) investigated teacher conferencing.

The continued focus and emphasis on the role of the teacher is also evident in the work of Cremin (2006), in particular her ‘teachers as writers’ research. The underlying principle of this research was to investigate teachers’ perceptions of themselves as writers. Sixteen teachers from England

participated in the ‘teachers as writers’ project by documenting their thoughts, challenges and limitations in response to the process of composing a piece of writing (Cremin, 2006). The underlying belief was that a teacher’s self-identity as a writer would directly influence their teacher pedagogy. Cremin (2006) found that some teachers transformed their writing practice through their experiences as a writer and transferred this new knowledge into the classroom context and their teaching. Some examples to illustrate this transferability included becoming more empathetic in their teaching of writing, extending the use of collaboration during classroom writing contexts and increasing choice of topic for student writers.

Cremin also stated, “The extent to which young children’s experience of composition resonates with adults is unclear” (Cremin, 2006 p. 429). Later, in 2016, Cremin and Oliver criticised the ‘teacher as a writer’ approach and the lack of research available on the effectiveness of this strategy and its transferability to the classroom environment, stating that “the evidence base with regard to the impact of teachers’ writing on student outcome is both limited and inconclusive” (p.23).

It was not the experiences of ‘teachers as writers’ but effective teacher pedagogical writing practices that was central to Gadd’s research (2014). In his extensive doctoral research on writing, entitled *What is Critical in the Effective Teaching of Writing? A Study of the Classroom Practice of some Year 5 to 8 Teachers in the New Zealand Context*, Gadd investigated effective teachers and the impact of their writing pedagogy upon students’ achievements in writing. Over a nine month period, 210 students’ writing achievements were tracked. This research study used students’ written output including writing assessment and draft and published writing as data. Only a small sample of students were interviewed regarding their experiences of writing, such as the level of difficulty, how they felt about the task and the teacher’s writing objective (p. 225). The voices of the students in this extensive research were secondary to that of their teachers’ voices.

Of the limited New Zealand studies that included students (see for example, Gadd, 2014; Parr & Timperley, 2010) none specifically targeted the needs of boys as writers. One international study that did focus on including the varying perspectives of teachers and boys alike was reported in *Reaching Boys and Teaching Boys* (Reichert & Hawley, 2010). This study investigated characteristics of effective teaching and lessons plans for boys from 18 schools across six countries. There were multiple teachers involved and anecdotal narratives from teachers' classroom experiences and boys' responses were included. Further research that focussed more specifically on the voice or identity of children as writers includes Dutro, Kazemi and Balf (2006) and Pennington (2014).

Two case studies in particular have provided rich insights into the thought processes of two individual reluctant male writers (Dutro et al., 2006; Glasswell et al., 2003). However, both of these studies focussed on the interaction between the teacher and the writer through conferencing and feedback.

Hawthorne's (2008) doctoral thesis into the motivation and engagement of reluctant writers at New Zealand secondary schools strongly focused on student voice and students' experiences as writers using focus group interviews and questionnaires. One aspect of this research compared motivation and engagement practices on two cohorts called 'motivated' and 'reluctant' writers. The use of student voice was particularly strong in this research but the target students were secondary students of both genders, that is, pupils between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. Reichert & Hawley (2010) also researched boys between twelve to nineteen. However, secondary school structures and students differ from primary school. More investigation is needed in the primary context.

Gadd (2014) supports this notion, arguing that there is a lack of research on the writing experiences of younger students. Of the 121 underachieving students identified in Gadd's 2014

study, the majority were male. Gadd (2014) argued that “continuing investigation needs to be undertaken on exploring literacy pedagogy required for success by under-achieving learners, especially boys” (p. 185). Both Gadd (2014) and Hawthorne (2008) suggest that further investigation is needed on male writers within the New Zealand context.

I have struggled to locate research on the voices of male primary school writers within the New Zealand context. Using the search engine words ‘writing, ‘male students’ and ‘New Zealand’ on Google and various library databases led to limited results. Perhaps one of the recent findings using this search mechanism supported this notion that there is an absence of current research into this area. In 2017, a joint research project between the New Zealand Government and the University of Auckland was announced to address the fact that, “Almost one in three Year 5-8 students in New Zealand do not achieve the national standard in writing. This low achievement is found most prolifically across Māori, Pacific and male students” (University of Auckland, 2017). The aim of this research project is “to support Year 5-8 teachers to generate stronger engagement, accelerated progress and higher levels of achievement in writing by priority learners” (University of Auckland, 2017). Although this research is in its initial stages, once again the focus is ‘teacher-centric’. How is it possible to create effective and engaging learning tasks for students without investigating and understanding what is engaging and motivating for the students? Student voice is imperative.

The research on reading habits of children tends to overshadow the research on writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). It appears that writing is somewhat the ‘poorer cousin’ in terms of the quantity of research output to its literary companion, reading: “While reading research has many theories guiding its implementation and practice writing research has consistently fallen behind. To date, there are very few theories supporting and explaining writing research, particularly those that originate with an educational focus” (Hodges, Feng, Kuo & McTigue, 2016, p. 9).

## **2.5 International Research into Gender and Writing**

The gap in achievement levels within the area of literacy between boys and girls has been widely documented over the last two decades (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; 2002; Maynard, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002; Skelton & Francis, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). As noted in the introduction, steps have been taken to investigate this issue and to narrow the gap (Alloway et al., 2002; Knowles & Smith, 2005; Marsh, 2003; Martino, 1995, 2001, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009).

The intention of work in this area is to understand, address and improve the complex issue of boys and their writing. However, statistical evidence for both the United Kingdom and the United States suggests this remains an issue. In the United Kingdom, for example, the gap between boys and girls within the area of writing level achievements was the largest of all learning areas (United Kingdom Department of Education, 2016). The United States Department of Education's National Centre for Education Statistics (2012) results for writing found that performance at both Grade 8 and Grade 12 showed that girls achieved higher results in writing at both levels than boys. Furthermore, the situation does not appear to be improving in Australia, with the Australian 2016 preliminary results indicating that no significant progress has been made since 2011 in writing levels, and in fact for children in Year 7 there has been a decrease in achievement levels (Dalzell, 2016).

The range of international literature that attempts to address and explain the issues surrounding the disparity between boys and girls and their writing levels is diverse. Biddulph (1995, 1997), Hoff-Sommers (2000), and Gurian (2001) position their argument around biological differences between the genders and the notion that boys and girls possess differing natural traits. Rowan et al. (2002) simply entitled this the 'boys will be boys' model, which is based on the belief that boys and girls are fundamentally different (p. 36). In opposition to this perspective is the

understanding that gender is a socially and culturally emergent phenomenon and that gender roles are socially constructed and learned through social interactions (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Kimmel, 2000).

Martino (1995) claimed that being literate is at odds with the hegemonic concept of masculinity. The concept of masculinity is featured in much of the literature on boys and writing (Connell, 1996; Cuttance & Thompson, 2008; Davies, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). There are several factors central to understandings of masculinity. Firstly, masculinity is perceived as a social and cultural construct, and secondly, multiple masculinities exist (Connell, 1995, 1996; Dutro, 2003; Skelton & Francis, 2003). Thirdly, masculinity is constructed directly in relation to its opposite ‘femininity’ and vice versa (Davies, 1989; Millard 1997). Millard (1997) researched the views of 255 secondary school students and found that the underachievement of boys in literacy was in part due to their perception that literacy was feminine and in opposition to their masculinity. However, Hansen’s (2001) study of 251 secondary students concluded that there were “no differences in students’ perception of writing as a gender-biased activity” (p. 15).

Young and Brozo (2001) argued that boys will be more motivated to read if they are provided with books with stereotypical masculine themes. However, the concept of using masculinity and boy friendly teaching methods and approaches towards literacy learning is claimed to be problematic and can result in the oversimplification of gender issues and the promotion of stereotypical teaching strategies (Martino, 2003; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Rowan, et al., 2002).

Martino’s (2003) study raised concerns regarding the ways in which teachers constructed gender realities and the use of stereotypical targeted teaching strategies for boys. Martino claims that aspects such as more outside time and employing “hands on” experiences could in fact be detrimental to boys’ success as literacy learners and may result in the “dumbing down” of teaching pedagogy for boys (2003, p.16). In order to address this, Kehler and Martino (2007)

argue that concepts of masculinity and alternative views on what it means to be masculine need to be investigated from the perspectives of both teachers and students.

Following an in-depth study of primary school teachers and pupils, Alloway et al. (2002) provided eight recommendations for engaging male writers. The first recommendation refers directly to the exploration of the social constructs of masculinity on classroom literacy and boys' behaviour. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) recommend broadening perceptions of masculinity to encourage diverse ways to be masculine. Alloway and Gilbert (2002) suggest adopting a critical literacy approach to literacy learning. Critical literacy is the understanding that all texts are socially and culturally constructed and that intentions, views, and power relations are inherent in literacy practices and content (Comber & Simpson, 2001). The use of critical literacy is further supported by Marsh (2003), who suggests applying the "text analyst" from Freebody and Luke's (1990) literacy model across all levels of schooling. She also advocates the use of popular culture and media resources within the classroom context. Marsh claims this would address the issues of engagement and motivation of male writers, along with providing potential contexts for critiquing multiple gender constructs.

## **2.6 New and Multiliteracies**

The definition of what literacy is and what it means to be literate has changed over time, depending on the social, cultural and historical context. In short, literacy is considered by many to be socially and culturally constructed (Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Makin, Diaz & McLachlan, 2007). Defining literacy is a complex and dynamic problem following from the status of literacy as an ever-changing entity that reflects the social and cultural context, academic research and theories, institutions or government agendas, as well as a personal or individualised understanding.

New literacies is a term widely used with reference to digital technology, and the rapidly changing information and communication technologies (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008). The definition of new literacies generally refers to the use of such things as the internet, gaming, text messaging, blogging, social networking, digital storytelling, augmented reality, media, video casting, virtual worlds, Skype and podcasting (Gee, 2013). The list of digital mediums is ever expanding, just as technology is.

The notion of new literacies is intended to illustrate a wider concept of literacy than the traditional model of literacy. The change from literacy to literacies acknowledges the multiple forms and contexts of literacy (Roswell & Walsh, 2011). Similarities exist between the definitions of ‘new literacies’ and ‘multiliteracies’; for example, both are concerned with the plurality of literacy in both medium and context (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Roswell & Walsh, 2011). Multiliteracies, however, is a term coined by the New London Group (1996) that arose from a collective concern with the rapidly changing forms of communication, from the mass media to the internet. Their manifesto redefined literacy to incorporate media and computer literacy and to acknowledge digital technological practices as literacy. The New London Group (1996) also emphasised the ability to engage creatively, critically and politically with technology (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Although differences in terminology and origins exist between ‘new’ and ‘multi’ literacies, both are intended to address the rapidly changing digital world and the role of literacy pedagogy within this context. As Roswell and Walsh (2011) state, “The use of terminology such as ‘new’ or ‘multi’ in descriptions of changes that have occurred with digital communication are attempts to describe the multiple devices and media texts that are ubiquitous in our world” (p. 54).

These new notions of literacy consider visual literacy communication through multiple forms including visual, audio and moving images (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). There is also a concern with the links between literacy learning both in and out of the school context, and claims that the interconnection of literacy within these contexts is necessary for relevant and future focused literacy learning (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008).



Lewis (2007), and Burn, Buckingham, Parry and Powell (2010) assert that boys use a range of literacy practices outside of school which are under utilised in school contexts, such as the use of blogs, gaming, writing multimedia stories, social media sites such as Facebook and Myspace. Sandretto and Tilson's (2013) study focused on teachers employing a critical literacy analysis approach to bridge out of school and in school literacy practices (McDowell, 2015).

Prensky (2001) coined the term 'digital natives' to describe the fact that some children are growing up in a technological age where their realities and experiences are immersed in the digital world. Prensky claims that to engage boys in literacy learning means it is necessary for effective teachers to develop an awareness of digital spaces. Herbert and Pagnani (2010) claim that these digital spaces are where some boys construct and reconstruct their identity and realities. Alloway et al. (2002) suggest that boys are more likely to be engaged by technological and electronic device use in literacy. They recommended widening literacy practice to include a wide range of cultural tools as well as multimedia practices. The use of multimodal stories is now recognised as an effective strategy for literacy learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Pahl & Roswell, 2005).

Furthermore, the use of new or multi literacies is seen to increase motivation for literacy learning by providing authentic audiences and collaborative spaces (Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers, 2013). The use of popular culture is also considered a means to motivate and engage learners (Hagood, Alvermann & Heron-Hruby, 2010; Marsh, 2003). However, Curwood (2013) claimed that employing new literacies and pop culture does not automatically lead to deep engagement.

A constantly changing digital landscape is a reality for 21st century male learners. The question that remains is what role, if any, new and multiliteracies play in boys' perceptions of and actions towards writing.

## **2.7 Storytelling**

Telling stories is a means of making sense of one's own reality and is a means to communicate and clarify ideas, to entertain and share with others. Stories explore the worlds where fantasy and reality collide, and identities are constructed (Gee, 2013). Stories are a means of personal and cultural expression (Tompkins, 1982). Andrews and Fischer (1991) describe stories as a means to share experience and create bonds amongst family, groups of friends and society in general. Within the Māori paradigm stories are a means to share one's identity, history, ancestors and the setting (Glynn & Bishop, 1995).

Stalwick (2007) contends that writing is a social practice that is shaped by gender. Boys learn culturally acceptable ways to express their identities and this can be seen in narratives boys write (Bausch, 2014). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) claim boys enjoy escapism and humour, and that popular culture and texts should play a role in literacy development. Newkirk (2000) suggests boys are more inclined to write narratives aligned with television, video and computer games. He argued for greater acceptance within the school context of parody, sports, cartoons and video gaming culture as writing topics and content.

Story writing can also be a social practice where friendships are made, and identities and groups are constructed and reconstructed (Dyson, 1997). Dyson (1993) identified there was a mismatch between the 'official' and 'unofficial' writing curriculum (cited in Bausch, 2014); that is, what the boys perceived as their world of writing and what they value as literacy practice, as opposed to what their teachers and schools require as literacy content and practice. Dyson (1985) argued that there was a need to acknowledge children as social beings who have their own social and play related reasons for utilising literacy. Dyson claims that writing should reflect the social lives and realities of the students and examples of these are often found in the "cracks of the official curriculum" (p.633).

Dyson (1985) further argues that the official or formal curriculum needs to be widened to recognise the various perceptions of literacy from a child's perspective. She suggests that a literacy programme that recognises and values these social and unofficial interactions will offer teachers literacy foundations to build upon. Although Dyson's paper was written in the 1980s, I claim it has particular relevance to 21st century children and the current context. Children have a world of interactions both in the digital and the real world. There is a need to perceive literacy not simply as a school activity but widen perceptions of what literacy is to include storytelling and other literacy practices that occur authentically beyond the classroom walls.

## **2.8 Enjoyment**

The Ministry of Education advocates that English is "the study, use and enjoyment of the English language" (MOE, 2007). If boys are to be motivated writers in class, it follows that they must be engaged in their writing activities (Turner, 1995; Turner & Paris, 1995). The 2006 National Educational Monitoring Project in New Zealand reported that Year 8 students were less positive about their writing than Year 4 students and that they also had fewer opportunities to write "things like poems and stories" (Crooks, Flockton & White, 2007, p. 58). One reason suggested for this difference was that there are more "creative opportunities at Year 4" (Crooks, Flockton & White, 2007, p. 58). Hogan (1980) researched 13,000 children aged between 8 and 14 and found that children's interest in writing appeared to decline as they got older. Shook, Marrion and Ollila (1989) stated that the decline of interest in writing may be attributed to the loss of self-expression or creativity by being caught up in the mechanics of writing.

Smith and Elley (1997) claim 'enjoyment' is a criterion best used for beginner writers to encourage and motivate writers. McNaughton, Jesson, Kolose and Kercher's (2012) research on summer reading habits found that enjoyment was the main motivation for children to read over the summer holidays. Thomas (2007) argues that teachers need to take notice of the enjoyment and joy of their students when engaged with new literacies or popular culture. Pennington (2014)

claims that when a child chooses to write and takes pleasure in writing this indicates that the child has incorporated 'being a writer' into their sense of identity. She further claims that the development of this sense of identity and confidence is essential to promote and create effective writers. Furthermore, she claims that in order to do this educators must relinquish some control over children's writing to enhance and develop their personal voice and agency.

## **2.9 The New Zealand Curriculum and Assessment of Writing**

*The New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE, 2007) guides teaching and learning within the New Zealand context. English is one of the eight independent learning areas within the curriculum. The other areas are as follows: mathematics, the arts, health and physical education, social sciences, science and technology, learning languages (MOE, 2007). Although writing is perceived as an interactive tool fundamental for accessing all learning areas, writing processes, objectives and indicators are placed under the learning area of English. As stated above, English is described as "the study, use and enjoyment of the English language and its literature, communicated orally, visually, and in writing, for a range of purposes and audiences and in a variety of text forms" (MOE, 2007, p.18). Writing is, in essence, essential for obtaining success across all areas of the national curriculum (MOE, 2007).

The boys participating in this study are in Years 5 and 6 at a state primary school. In order to understand the context in which they are judged and operate, an understanding of the National Standard benchmarks for these levels is required. In Year 5 being 'at' standard means working 'towards' Level 3 of the New Zealand Curriculum, and in Year 6 it is differentiated by working 'at' Level 3. The only word that changes is 'towards' at Level 5 and 'at' at Level 6 (MOE, 2009, p. 28). The level for learning in Years 5 and 6 is Level 3 of the New Zealand Curriculum. The following New Zealand Curriculum (2007) objectives for this level are summarised below:

1. Processes and strategies - Integrate sources of information, processes, and strategies with developing confidence to identify, form, and express ideas.

2. Purposes and audiences - Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.
3. Ideas - Select, form, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.
4. Language features - Use language features appropriately, showing a developing understanding of their effects.
5. Structure - Organise texts, using a range of appropriate structures. (MOE, 2007)

Criticism exists within both the new literacies and literacy fields, and amongst general educational theorists regarding the use of standardised criteria and tests to measure achievement (Gee, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Luke, 1998). Some of the reasons cited for this include that testing narrows concepts of literacy to more simplistic skills, stifles creativity, discourages literacy learning as a cooperative practice, lessens engagement, limits cognitive thought, imagination, and curiosity, invokes teaching to the test and wastes time (Gee, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Luke, 1998). Packwood and Messenheim (2003) claim that the emphasis on writing as a measurable product through standardised testing overemphasises writing as a technical task and that this directly results in disengagement for students in the writing process. They suggest that writing should be perceived as a social on-going process for sharing and critically reflecting upon oneself and place within the world and as a “reflective, metacognitive tool” (p. 145).

## **2.10 Ownership**

The concept of ownership is multifaceted and intertwined with concepts such as autonomy, power, voice and responsibility, authentic engagement, self-regulation and choice (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995; Kohn, 2000). Ownership of one’s writing is strongly advocated by Graves (1983) who suggests that children want to write and should be choosing their topic for writing 80% of the time in the younger years. Furthermore, Graves claimed the regular occurrence of teachers providing children topics, story starters and defining the direction of their writing is a limitation for writing.

Vokoun and Bigelow (2008) claim that choice results in engagement and that students who have ownership of their writing are more highly likely to be engaged than those who do not. Engagement and motivation in one's learning results in increased levels of achievement (Joselowsky, 2007). In line with this, Hawkin and Certo's (2014) research into boys and poetry writing in the United States concluded that freedom and choice - that is, the possibility for children to select their own writing topic - were factors that directly related to the engagement and enjoyment of writing poetry. Their research also suggested that ownership develops self-regulatory practices. It is also suggested that the more choice students have, the more committed they are, and the more likely they are to persevere through challenges (Perry & Drummond, 2002).

Parr and Glasswell (2010) dispute the notion that interest in the writing topic equates in better writing. They criticised the use of topic choice being left to students and the notion that self-selected topics are superior to teacher imposed topics. They also criticised teachers' apparent emphasis on motivating writers during the writing process and the dominance of talk time, claiming that this results in less time for the act of writing and therefore limited writing output. Parr and Glasswell advocate instead for authenticity of learning experiences and the interconnection of a student's background and prior knowledge with real world contexts and interactions. Gadd (2014), however, concluded that one effective teaching strategy that resulted in improved student writing outcomes was to "involve students in selecting and/or constructing learning tasks" (p.179). He argues that this co-construction would enable both student interest and authenticity to be maintained and negotiated.

Bruning and Horn (2000) questioned the amount of evidence that supported authentic learning contexts as a motivation to write. In contrast, Hawthorne's (2008) doctoral thesis on reluctant writers and the impact of engagement and motivation on writing output, strongly concluded that students' interest and relevant real life contexts were important: "The most significant

theme to come through the focus group discussions was the importance of interest in a topic and the perceived relevance of the writing tasks the students were asked to do to their own lives and goals. Across all of the reluctant and engaged writers in this study, this was the most discussed factor” (Hawthorne, 2008, p. 163).

Gadd (2014) also found that self-regulatory practices had the most significant impact for the outcomes of student writers. One of the features identified as self-regulatory practice is the notion that the learning is student centred rather than teacher centred. This means that students have control over the learning, setting goals, problem solving, organising and self-evaluating their writing. Gadd (2014) also maintained that there was a significant need for teachers to “give time and opportunities for their students to write on self-selected topics” (p. 190). In relation to effective literacy practices, the Ministry of Education’s Effective Literacy website, *Te Kete Ipurangi* (TKI), states: “As well as completing teacher-directed writing tasks, students need time to write for their own purposes. They need opportunities to write simply and honestly about their own experiences and things that matter to them and to share their writing.” (MOE, n.d).

## **2.11 Student Voice**

The role of student voice has gained increased attention in research and in schools over the past decade as a means to improve teaching and learning effectiveness. This is supported by the understanding that children are not passive recipients or empty vessels to be filled by their adult teachers, rather children reconstruct and construct their own meanings, understanding and shared knowledge through social and cultural interactions (Smith, Taylor & Gollop, 2000).

The use of student voice acknowledges that children have valuable experiences, thoughts and opinions and their perspectives are imperative in the teaching and learning interaction (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011). Students are “active meaning makers capable of acting in their own interests and contributing unique and valuable perspectives on their experiences” (Charteris & Thomas, 2017, p. 167). Student voice can also assist in developing a deeper understanding of

literacy learning and the literacy curriculum from the students' perspective (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011). It provides students with the opportunity to talk about what assists or hinders their learning. It is also a means to create a shared dialogue around the teaching and learning of writing. Student voice values the insight that students have as critical witnesses in their learning (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011).

The use of student voice within the educational context has been criticised as mere tokenism that results in little follow up or change from the consultation with students (Thomson, 2011). Czerniawski and Kidd (2011) also argue that it is difficult for teachers to authentically implement student voice due to the current neo-liberal climate that focuses on testing, standards, reporting and accountability. Despite this criticism and the challenges of implementing effective student voice, it remains an essential component for understanding literacy learners. The use of student voice is a means to bridge the gap between teacher and student perceptions. Students' perspectives may or may not differ from adults' perspectives, however, their voice offers a valuable and much needed insight into the child's reality. Therefore, in order to begin to understand the boys in this study and their perceptions of writing and the writing process, I advocate employing student voice as a primary source of data.

## **2.12 Summary**

This chapter briefly outlined the meaning and purpose of writing and the theoretical background that surrounds the teaching and learning of writing. This chapter also reviewed some of the literature surrounding boys and writing within New Zealand and international contexts. It aimed to present some of the theories relating to literacy and boys, including the concepts of masculinity, the role of new and multiliteracies, ownership, enjoyment and finally student voice. Chapter Three will outline the methodology used in this research study.



## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter begins with the research questions and then addresses the rationale for the use of a qualitative methodology in this research study. This is followed by a description of the context of the study and the ethical considerations that guided the investigation. The data collection methods are described, including participant observations, interviews and writing sessions. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the data analysis process and steps taken to enhance the validity of the findings.

### **3.1 Research Questions**

The over-arching research question I sought to explore in this study is:

What are the thoughts, perceptions and experiences of Year 5 and 6 boys as writers?

The following five subsidiary questions were also explored:

What do boys perceive as their strengths and weaknesses as writers?

What types of writing do boys enjoy and why?

What role does ownership play in boys' perceptions of writing?

What themes are apparent in boys' stories?

What are the teachers' perceptions of the challenges male writers face in the classroom?

### **3.2 Rationale for Qualitative Research**

The intent of this research was to investigate the voices and multiple perspectives of boys as writers and their teachers' perceptions of male writers. The aim was to explore the constructs and understandings that boys create around their writing. This is educational research that focusses on human interactions in a social setting. The context is a New Zealand primary school and the emphasis is on the teaching and learning of writing.

My theoretical framework adopts a sociocultural perspective, with the understanding that the boys construct their knowledge through social and cultural interactions (Blurr, 1995). Qualitative research aims to explore the meanings people attach to their lives, the social constructs they create or recreate, and how people interpret their social reality (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). As qualitative methodology focuses on developing relationships and is less formal than quantitative research, it allows researchers flexibility throughout the data gathering process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Taylor et al., 2016). Flexibility and change were important components in this research. Through my involvement in the field, I deepened my understanding of the boys and their perspectives, and developed my relationship with them. This in turn added nuance to the questions I asked. As a result, I was able to probe and respond, reflect and follow tangents.

The qualitative research paradigm honours another voice, which in this instance was my voice as the researcher/teacher. My subjectivity, viewpoints, value judgements, assumptions and biases are embedded in the research cycle, from the initial research questions to the presentation of my findings. As an emerging qualitative researcher, I am not required to reject my subjectivity but rather to address it, acknowledging and critically reflecting upon this bias and the role it plays in the research process (Taylor et al., 2016). This is a strength of qualitative research, as it does not reduce people to numbers and claim that an objective scientific truth exists, but rather acknowledges that reality is subjective and that the researcher has a voice or story to tell within the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Taylor et al., 2016).

The multiple role of insider, teacher and researcher had definite advantages for this study, including an understanding of the setting and environment, and the culture within my school. Established relationships already existed that, in some regards, helped to encourage and foster social interaction and honesty. It is, however, important to acknowledge the possibility that established relationships may also have a differing effect on some of the participants. The

teachers' participation in this research project was voluntary and participation and/or non-participation did not in any way effect their position or standing at the school. However, it remains difficult to affirm that all teachers were completely open and honest or felt truly comfortable. Issues of power and politics are inherent within the research process and within the school context (Costley, Elliot & Gibbs, 2010). To mitigate this it is recommended that researchers study those with the same level of power or a higher level of power as was the case in this research study. I held no position within the school structure and was not perceived as an authority figure. I also endeavored to share my philosophical belief that the research was 'with' and not 'on' the boys and their teachers.

This research approach and aim was aligned with action research, which directly rejects the notion that research is carried out solely by researchers and acknowledges and values the skills that practitioners situated in the research setting or context bring (Elliott, 2010). Stenhouse (1975) and Elliott (2010) suggest that teachers are not just subjects in and consumers of educational research, and that teachers should have a role in creating research. Practitioners have valuable knowledge, ideas, theory and contributions to make through research grounded in their practice. A qualitative approach was therefore considered appropriate for this study in order to enable probing and gain depth of understanding of the issue being explored.

Case studies can involve both qualitative and quantitative research (Yin, 2009). This case study is strongly grounded within a qualitative research context (Creswell, 2014). The case study is an appropriate method as it "allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events-such as individual life cycles, small group behavior...school performance" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). The case study methodology also asks questions such and 'how and why' as is reflected in the use of the research questions that guided this study (Yin, 2009).

### **3.3 Setting**

This study was conducted at Blue Primary School (a pseudonym), which was, at the time, my place of work. Blue Primary School is a New Zealand state primary school that caters for children from Years 1 to 6. The number of pupils who attended the school at the time of this study in 2016 was 295. There were twelve teachers on the staff and a non-teaching principal. The school had a decile rating of 9. Deciles are based on the socio-economic factors of an area. Decile one is the lowest and decile ten is the highest. Within this school there were two areas. The junior school consisted of children in Years 1 to 3 and the senior school consisted of children from Years 4 to 6. Within the senior school there were two teams, the Red Team and the Yellow Team. Two classes of Year 5 and 6 children and one Year 4 class made up each team.

### **3.4 The Participants**

For this single site case study, a purposive sample of twelve male writers between the ages of 9 and 11 from Year 5 and Year 6 were selected from the Red and Yellow Teams. There was a cross-section of six boys from each team whose writing was at various achievement levels. The participants were selected according to mid-year July 2016 overall teacher judgement (OTJ) (MOE, n.d) and New Zealand National Standards in Writing data in consultation with the boys' teachers. The sample group consisted of two boys who were identified as 'above' the National Standard in Writing at mid-year July 2016 OTJ data, four boys who were identified as 'at' the National Standards in Writing for 2016 July OTJ data and six boys who were identified as being below National Standard in Writing or identified as being 'at risk' of falling below.

Drawing students from the Red and Yellow Teams was not intended as a comparative sample. The use of the teams reflects the school's organisational structure. These groupings were used for timetabling purposes to ensure limited interruptions were made to the normal teaching programme.

Four teachers were invited to participate in this study. These four teachers taught the boys participating in the study. They included three from the senior syndicate and the school deputy principal who was also a teacher from the senior school. All four of the teachers accepted and were participants in this research project. The genders of the participating teachers included two males and two female teachers. For the purpose of this study, the teachers will be referred to using the following pseudonyms: Ms Smith, Mr Rogers, Ms Clark, and Mr Thompson. All the senior teachers were consulted at an initial team meeting to introduce the research study and its aims. I also attended four team meetings to discuss any issues regarding scheduling of this project and to answer any queries.

### **3.5 Ethical Issues**

Consent was gained from the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee (ERHEC) for the study to proceed (Appendix A). In order to gain this permission there were ongoing discussions with the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee (ERHEC) regarding the sample of twelve boys. At first, I intended the research project to be an investigation of ‘at risk’ male writers who were achieving below the current National Standards in Writing or ‘at risk’ of falling below the National Standard in Writing. ERHEC raised concerns regarding the negative stigma that may be attached to the label ‘at risk’, including the point that easy identification by peers of the sample group could be potentially harmful. In response to this concern, the sample group was widened to include a mixed level of abilities.

The principal, participating teachers and the Board of Trustees were provided with information sheets regarding the research project and their consent was obtained (Appendices, B, C, & D). It was explained that the school and the teachers could withdraw from the project at any time. All participants were made aware that the research will be published as part of a Master of Education degree. Pseudonyms have been given to maintain participants’ anonymity, and information was

treated confidentially. Participants' personal information was removed from interviews and transcripts. As stated earlier, the school in which the research was conducted was also given a pseudonym.

Once the boys were selected in conjunction with their teachers, I organised a group meeting with the selected boys to distribute the information sheets and consent forms which outlined the project aims, details and research design (Appendix E). We read through the information sheet and a verbal discussion of what would be involved followed. The boys were informed that pseudonyms or code names would be used and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Due to the age of the participants, which ranged between nine and eleven years, permission was also sought from the boys' parents/caregivers (Appendix F). All the boys returned their consent forms and were willing to be part of the research.

### **3.6 Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods were deeply embedded in qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe the data collection methods as turning "the world into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self" (p. 3). The methods I used to collect data from the students were observations, individual semi-structured interviews, group discussions and writing samples. The data was gathered over a five-week period, mostly during the writing sessions and literacy time-slot from 9.00 to 10.30am on each week-day from Monday to Thursday.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data collection tools and process. Further details about these follow Table 1.

**Table 1:** Data Collection Overview

Step 1	Interviewed twelve boys individually using semi-structured interview questions for approximately 10-15 minutes. Audio recorded.
Step 2	Interviewed four teachers individually using semi-structure interview questions for approximately 25 minutes. Audio recorded.
Step 3	Observed twelve boys during a normal in-class writing lesson. Each observation focused on two writers within a 45-50 minute time frame. The process was repeated five more times to observe all the boys, making a total of, six in-class observations. Documented using field notes.
Step 3a	Observed one boy from Red Team using the Chromebook during an in-class writing session. Observed one boy from Yellow Team using the Chromebook during an in-class writing session. Documented using field notes.
Step 4	Observed three teachers individually: Ms Clark and Mr Thompson from Team Red Team and Mr Rodgers from Yellow Team. Documented using field notes.
Step 5	Conducted an introductory session with all participating boys to introduce the research project.  Conducted five writing sessions, during which time group discussions were undertaken and audio recorded. Wrote follow up notes.
Step 6	Preliminary analysis of themes from boys' interviews (1) and group discussions (5). Conducted short five minute individual interviews with teachers using semi structured questions based on preliminary findings. Audio recorded.

### 3.6.1 Interviews

Interviews within the qualitative research paradigm are concerned with engagement and exchange, and should occur within a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Taylor et al., 2016). This research began with an individual semi-structured interview with each of the participating twelve boys. These took place during the first week in the field and were each approximately 10 to 15 minutes in duration. Some interviews were shorter or longer depending on what the boys wanted to discuss. These were transcribed after the initial interviews. These interviews were part of the process of developing understanding and rapport with the boys. These transcripts were not given to the boys to check although they were referred to at times during the subsequent group discussions.

The importance of developing a relaxed rapport and atmosphere with the boys guided my delivery and staging of the initial interviews (Gollop, 2000). During these interviews, I made sure I sat beside the boy and on the floor whilst they sat on the chair to create a relaxed and non-threatening environment. I was aware that there is an inherent power relationship between an adult interviewer and a child interviewee (Gollop, 2000). During the initial interviews, I told the boys a little about myself and my passions, interests and friends. In turn, they also shared some of their passions, friends and hobbies. The interview questions (Appendix G) elicited information regarding their ideas about writing, themselves as writers, and their perceptions of their friends' and teachers' views of writing.

Following the initial semi-structured interviews with the boys, I conducted separate interviews with each of the four teacher participants. I provided a hard copy of the questions for the teachers beforehand (Appendix H). I also emailed each teacher a copy. I wanted the teachers to feel prepared and at ease with the questions. These interviews took place individually in the teachers' classrooms after school. The initial teacher interviews were approximately 20 to 25 minutes in duration. I transcribed these interviews and a copy of their transcript was given to each teacher to check for accuracy, make changes or additions, and to secure approval to use as findings. No changes were made. One transcript was later used by a teacher as evidence of a professional discussion for the school internal reflection process.

Following the in-class observations and the five writing sessions with the participating boys, a further five to ten minute interview was conducted with each of the teachers in response to some of the themes emerging from the study. These were conducted to probe deeper and in order to gain an understanding of the teachers' perceptions of what the boys discussed. This included questions on the use of 'free write', the emphasis on spelling and punctuation within the classroom programme, as well as writing timetables and planning within the Year 5 and 6 classes.



### **3.6.2 The Participant Observations**

The participant observations provided valuable information and rich descriptive data. Thick descriptions are defined as detailed experiences and accounts of the activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Taylor et al., 2016). These thick descriptions explored the boys' relationship to writing, their routines and habits, what they do and what they talk about. These types of descriptive details also add credibility to the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Taylor et al., 2016).

I conducted one 45-minute classroom participant observation of the participating boys during in-class writing activities. During this initial participant observation, I focused on two boys at a time, repeating this process five times to have an observation of each boy involved in the study. This provided a snapshot to investigate the boys' writing within the classroom context. One of the limitations of the participant observations was the fact that the class writing topic for the five weeks that I was in the field was based on report writing around the theme of the Olympics. During this time, all the Year 5 and 6 boys were researching and writing a report on Chromebooks.

I did endeavor to gain access to the participating boys' Chromebook search history to further understand their methods and approach to researching Olympic information, and gain a better understanding of their writing, however, due to school policy, I was not able to locate their search history. I was able to observe two boys, individually on separate occasions, using and interacting with the computer within each of their classroom contexts. The intention was to gain a more extensive and detailed observation of two boys using the Chromebooks during writing, for example, their search methods and the websites they visited. This was to develop a deeper understanding of their thought processes and the selection and use of information. I was also able to track the changes made to a Google Docs document and did so for one participant. This was to provide a snapshot of Chromebook use when using a teacher prepared template. Due to ethical issues surrounding computer use, this data was not used in the findings section. There were also

limited teacher directed lessons to be observed. I did, however, observe one writing session based on recount writing.

I observed three of the four teachers taking a writing lesson. These observations were completed after the student observations. One teacher who participated in the study was the acting principal during the research period, therefore I was unable to observe her in the classroom. Most lessons were taught collaboratively by two teachers. I endeavoured to remain focussed on one teacher during each observation. At times the interconnectedness of the teaching made this challenging. Rowan and Correnti (2009) suggest that resource limitations including time and money can affect the ability to conduct in-depth field research and therefore snapshot observations are both appropriate and necessary at times. In accord with this, I conducted only one observation of each of the three teachers during a writing lesson.

### **3.6.3 Structure of Writing Sessions and Group Discussions**

After initial interviews had been conducted with the participating boys and teachers and the observations had taken place, one introductory session and five writing sessions were held with the boys. Within these writing sessions, semi-structured group discussions were conducted at various times; these were audio recorded. This provided an opportunity for the boys to interact with one another. They were able to spark off each other, to clarify ideas and thoughts, and debate and discuss their experiences in an informal and relaxed manner. This approach was not without challenges as more vocal boys had the ability to dominate discussions. This did occur on several occasions but was mitigated through the use of a co-constructed, child-friendly code of conduct. This was discussed, documented and collectively agreed between the boys and myself at the initial session. The co-constructed guidelines were effective as they reiterated the codes of communication during the group discussions and were often referred to. One of the codes required the group to acknowledge and accept the opinions of others with the understanding that an opposing opinion or viewpoint was also valid.

The introductory session was with all twelve boys and introduced the research question: What are your thoughts and perceptions of writing? The individual interviews had been completed prior to this. The responses to the initial interview questions, although confirming some of my initial hunches, also provided unanticipated insights. As a means to probe deeper, I used the responses from the initial interview questions as a guide for some of the writing sessions. During the introductory session, the group work guidelines and the code of ethics were established with the group. We discussed and co-constructed the guidelines for “what is said in the room stays in the room” and “respect for ideas and opinions”. We also discussed the aims of the research and read Anthony Browne’s *Voices in the Park* (1998) to illustrate the point of hearing different voices and opinions. The overarching concept that all perspectives were considered valid and valuable was reiterated throughout the writing sessions. This was intended to mitigate any peer influence that may have influenced individual responses during the writing sessions and group discussions.

The introductory session was followed by five writing sessions. Writing Session One was based on free writing; Writing Session Two focused on collaborative free writing; Writing Session Three was based on the selection and discussion of favourite writing samples; Writing Session Four was based on editing and spelling; Writing Session Five was based on a variety of themes including gender and asTTle (MOE, 2003) testing.

The first writing session, based on free write, was conducted with each group of boys separately. The topic for this session was developed directly from the initial twelve interviews in which six of the boys discussed how free write was their strength or the type of writing they enjoyed. This session involved exploring their thoughts and perceptions of free write during the act of free writing. The development of ideas, the themes of the text and the challenges they faced were discussed. The boys wrote for a duration of 10 minutes in their journals, followed by a short group discussion. This was followed by another 10 minutes of writing and a group discussion of the process. Next, there was a self-reflection on the writing produced and a sharing of the stories,

as requested by the participants. Writing Session One was conducted with one team and then repeated with the next team.

Eleven boys attended the second writing session, five in one group and six in the second group. This session involved exploring the thoughts and perceptions of the boys as writers, while working in groups and with buddies during a session focused on collaborative free writing. In addition to my observations of the boys as they wrote, a group discussion was conducted during the collaborative writing process as well as after the writing process.

The third writing session was based on selecting a favourite piece of writing and all twelve boys attended this session together. The aim of the session was two-fold; to gain an understanding of what the boys considered to be their best writing and why, and to investigate the ability to give and receive feedback. Each boy justified the selection of a particular piece of writing as their favourite during a group discussion; this was recorded. The boys then read and gave each other feedback using a “two stars and a wish format” (Cameron & Dempsey, 2013). Appendix I provides an example of the feedback presented in this session. This was followed by a group discussion on the giving and receiving of feedback.

The fourth writing session focussed on editing and the ‘surface features’ within writing. Surface features are defined as the conventions of print or the mechanics of writing, including print conventions such as full stops, capitals, proper nouns, exclamation marks, letter formation and handwriting (MOE, 1996). Ten boys attended this fourth writing session together; two of the participants were absent. During this writing session the role of editing, spelling and self-correcting writing was discussed. The boys then edited their initial free write stories and their collaborative stories. A group discussion was conducted at three stages; the beginning, during, and at the end of the session. The questions were designed to elicit the boys’ perceptions of editing and self-correcting. The roles of a teacher, buddy and self in developing editing skills were also discussed.

The fifth, and final, writing session consisted of a variety of topics. All twelve boys attended this session. The boys individually drew and created cartoons based on their thoughts and ideas on the act of writing. Group discussions on asTTle (MOE, 2003) and gender issues were also conducted; for example, the perception that girls enjoyed writing more than boys. This was raised in response to an initial interview answer from one of the boys when asked “Who do you think is a good writer in your class?” His response was, “Probably, mostly the girls are because they, sometimes, most of them stay focussed unlike us boys we don’t really”.

This was followed by an evaluative group discussion of the boys involvement in the research process. This was based on two questions, “What are your thoughts and opinions on being part of the research study?” and “Are there any final thoughts or opinions you wish to communicate to me, your peers or your teachers?”

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Bogdan and Bilken (2007) define data analysis as “working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145). The first step in my analysis of the data was organising the data. I repeatedly listened to audio recordings of the individual and group discussions. Audio-recording all interviews and discussions was beneficial as they could be repeatedly replayed. This allowed me to achieve accuracy of the spoken word during the transcription process. It also enabled me to not only to capture words but prosodic features such as tone or stress. One limitation inherent in this method was that I was unable to visually record the participants’ body language. Therefore, at times, I included descriptive field notes or jottings to provide a visual context following the session. An example of this follows.

Frank opens the door wears a black hoodie and black shorts with bare feet. The temperature is 5 degrees outside. He says “Hello” in a loud and confident voice. He reaches down and

grabs a writing book on the floor in front of him and asks, “Are we able to keep these?” I nod “Cool” he says hands under his knees he leans out and begins to swing on his chair. His blue eyes look directly at me and he is obviously confident and ready to talk. (Initial Individual Interviews, August 2016)

I believe the transcribing of my own data enabled me to have an in-depth understanding of the data I had gathered. Perhaps the biggest challenge was the sheer volume of the data I had collected. I gathered writing samples, comments from books, Chromebook activity audits of document changes, long term plans, asTTle (MOE, 2003) writing samples, and cartoons. I then began the process of coding. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest coding is a way to “organize, manage and retrieve the most meaningful bits of data” (p. 26). Furthermore, coding enables the researcher to select and retrieve information in order to develop themes and linkages and to identify key patterns (Taylor et al., 2016).

The initial coding process began with the intensive reading and re-reading of the data to code the field notes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The emerging themes included feedback, assessment, gender, free write, spelling, quantity, freedom, choice, handwriting, sharing, Chromebooks, timetables, stories, popular culture, violence, gaming, collaboration, social groups, relationships and oral language. Some thematic decisions were made based on my initial research questions. Comments were made under different headings to help me organise the data collected.

At times, I felt a tension between finding data that referred to the research questions and wanting to be open to all the possible new themes that the data showed. I resolved this issue by employing a balanced approach. I would refer to the research questions and document the emerging themes. I endeavoured to be as specific as possible but also allowed for tentative and vague themes (Taylor et al., 2016). I was aware that I needed to be guided by the initial purpose of the research and followed the advice of Taylor et al., (2016): “After you have listed themes, see how they relate to your story line and where they fit into your hypothetical chapter outline. Some themes will not relate to your story line; these can be set aside” (p. 182). Although many themes became apparent, I also discovered that my excitement and enthusiasm as a novice researcher needed to

be tempered by a more systematic approach. Taylor et al., (2016) stated: “You will probably find that some themes overlap or relate conceptually and that you will be able to collapse them under broader headings” (p. 182). This led me to the next step, axial coding.

Axial coding was necessary in order to identify the relationships between the codes. Axial coding, unlike open coding which breaks the data open, endeavours to link areas to each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Employing an inductive approach enabled me to read deeper meanings and inferences into the participants’ beliefs and actions. I began to categorise and link concepts and themes to one another. This enabled me to reduce the number of initial codes that I had created from twenty to ten.

After a meeting with my supervisors to discuss the initial themes, further analysis of the data and themes was undertaken using selective coding. This type of coding attempts to identify an overarching theme or a single category as a central phenomenon (Taylor, et al., 2016). During this process of selective coding, the key concepts that reappeared regularly guided the research (Charmaz, 2003). I selected and discarded data, confirming and elaborating the themes that I had identified, which involved constantly revisiting the data. As a result, I finally established six primary themes. These are interrelated and these will be discussed in Chapter Four.

### **3.8 Validity**

Validity of one’s research can be partially measured by the fact that the research process could be replicated or conducted in another context. A clear and detailed description of the participants and methods, as given above, assists with this. Additionally, triangulation, peer review, duration in field, explaining personal bias, presenting contradictory evidence and using an external reviewer are ways stated by Creswell (2014) to help increase validity and credibility. By employing a variety of data collection methods and approaches, as well as a variety of data sources, I was able to cross-reference the actions of the writers gathered from observations with

data from the interviews and group discussions. This triangulation of data has helped increase the validity of the findings of this research project.

### **3.9 Summary**

This chapter outlined the qualitative approach used in this study and introduced the research questions. The participants and data collection methods were described, including participant observations, interviews and the writing sessions. The chapter explained the data analysis process and steps taken to enhance the validity of the findings. The next chapter will present the findings.



## **Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion**

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings from the twelve participating boys and their four teachers. Data from the initial individual interviews with the boys and teachers, the group discussions, the five writing sessions, participant observations, writing samples and field notes will be analysed and discussed. The perspectives of the boys and their teachers will be interwoven, and will draw on the different data types using a thematic approach. The discussion is incorporated into the findings section. All the boys are referred to by their pseudonyms and the teachers are also identified by their pseudonyms as Ms Smith, Mr Rogers, Ms Clark, and Mr Thompson.

### **4.1 Introduction**

The six themes identified are presented and discussed in this chapter. The first theme is the role of free writing and self-selected topic choice within the realm of boys' writing. The second theme addresses the official and unofficial curriculum, and the multiple perceptions of literacy that the boys are frequently negotiating within the school context. The third theme relates to the importance of story writing for boys, and the use of popular culture and virtual worlds within their stories. The fourth theme is the significance of collaborative writing and the social world of writing as a means to develop and maintain friendships and relationships. The fifth theme addresses differing perceptions of gender and writing. The sixth and final theme explores spelling, surface features and quantity verse quality of output in writing.

The six themes are summarised and titled as follows:

Choice and the free write;

The official and unofficial worlds of writing;

Stories and the role of the virtual world and popular culture;

Collaboration and the social world of writing;

Gender and writing;

Spelling, surface features and quantity versus quality of output in writing.

#### **4.2 Choice and the Free Write**

The first theme highlights the significance of choice and freedom and the importance of self-selecting writing topics and themes for the boy writers. This is illustrated through the concept of free write. Free write is defined simply as students' choice to write about whatever they want. Although this term may appear simplistic, it reflects deeper concepts such as autonomy and self-determination, where the students have a sense that one's writing is one's own (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995; Graves, 1983; Kohn, 2000; Perry & Drummond, 2002; Vokoun & Bigelow 2005). Two of the sub-questions I sought to investigate were in reference to the type of writing that the boys enjoyed and what the boys perceived as their writing strengths. A third sub-question was based on the role of ownership for the boys in relation to writing. These concepts of freedom, choice and ownership are somewhat interconnected and thus I have addressed these as one theme.

During the initial individual interviews with the boys I was surprised at the frequency in which free write was referred to in relation to these questions. Almost half of the boys indicated they liked free write and/or writing about self-selected topics. As the boys were interviewed individually, they could not have been influenced by any of the other boys' responses. Their responses were as follows:

I like reports and free write... made up stories. You get to, like, express your imagination with words. (Ben)

I enjoy the free writes. You get to express your mind and everything. (Mark)

I quite enjoy free writing, you know free write, so I quite like making up stories and sometimes like doing stuff that's real. (Paul)

Well, I like free writing, yeah, I mostly write about weird stuff or just soccer and my strengths would be, like, um, probably my imagination. (Richard)

Free writing, because I can use my imagination and write whatever I want on it. (Simon)

Paul also thought his friends valued free write. When asked what his friends considered good writing he stated, “They quite like free writing as well. You can choose anything you want to or make anything up”.

Free write appears to develop a sense of control and power for the writer. The ability to choose means that one’s actions are perceived as one’s own. As Ben stated, “I like free write because you don’t have to do what the teacher tells you to and it is much more funnier [sic] because you get your own ideas”.

The boys reported differing frequencies of time given for free write on self-selected writing topics. One group of six boys responded that they were able to select their own topic “often” (Richard), “not much” (Mark), “no” (Paul), “not really” (Simon), “hardly ever” (John) and “about four times this year” (Tama). When teachers were asked about the opportunities they gave for free writing, one teacher answered: “Not often. I would say no” (Ms Clark). Another teacher explained that free choice was given within the framework of a topic:

It depends on what you consider free choice; usually we will build into a free choice. From next week, they will get a free choice as to what they will write their report on, something Olympic based but whether that’s an Olympian or national flag, the country or that country’s national animal. They get quite free rein on that. Probably trying to build in a free choice within a set genre rather than them getting to do what they like. (Mr Rogers)

A senior teacher with over twenty years teaching experience addressed the apparent contradiction of choice as opposed to curriculum obligations, and observed how teachers and schools often set the themes via long term plans and school wide topics:

We don’t give the kids enough choices with their writing, but then again they’re just kids and you have to do that modelling. One of the courses I went to, there must have been about 500 of us at the course, and the guy says, “So who in this room can say that their children chose

their focus or their context for learning?” Out of all us teachers no hands went up because we choose it for them. We say “OK, It’s the Olympics, let’s do the Olympics”. (Ms Smith)

Another teacher stated that the children had been given opportunities to free write within the classroom context:

I think they get given plenty of opportunities, well they have in our class in the past. It is one of those situations that doesn’t suit everyone, “what am I going to write about?” or they have not been scaffolded enough or know even where to begin. (Mr Thompson)

Interactions during a free write session with one group of boys illustrates this teacher’s observation regarding the struggles some children can face when provided with a choice of what they can write about. The following transcript from a free write session, Writing Session 1, demonstrates some of the processes when children are required to select a topic:

Robert: I don’t know what to write about?

Frank: I’m just wondering what to write about?

Robert: Can I write about my last weekend?

Researcher: It’s your choice. It’s your free write.

Frank: (whispers) What am I going to write about? (begins to click his pen)

All four boys start writing except Frank who continues to click his pen. He looks up and demonstrates that he is thinking by scratching his chin. He bangs his feet against the floor and sighs. He rests his head on the paper and continues to click his pen. Someone opens the door Frank looks around and begins to demonstrate that he is thinking again. His eyes roll up towards the ceiling.

Researcher: What’s going on for you Frank?

Frank: It’s kinda hard to think about it.

Robert: I’m kinda better at a set topic.

Frank: Me too.

Frank found it difficult to free write at that time. Both these boys were also members of the class where the teacher stated they did not free write very often, so perhaps this may have had an impact on the students’ ability to do this. There are also apparent contradictions in what the boys

say and think. Robert, in the initial interview, said he enjoyed “making my own stories up” yet when required to free write he stated he preferred being given a set topic. This contradiction may relate to a variety of factors including lack of purpose for the writing, lack of motivation at this given time or the need for scaffolding and writing ignites or models.

Another comment regarding the types of writing that the boys enjoyed and/or considered their strengths was made with reference to personal interests. Piripi stated: “I most like writing when it's about something that I like to do or something about myself”. When asked what he would like to write about more he stated: “maybe more about what I like and stuff that I do on my weekend, not in school”. When probed further as to what type of writing this would be he responded: “like my hobbies, wrestling. I like writing about that and dancing and stuff, rugby and all those stuff”. This writer illustrates the desire to share his personal interests and passions through his writing.

One student described the importance of their teachers being aware of the boys’ writing interests:

I think it is really important that the teachers know what we like. To do a bit more of what we like, you know to get us into writing. Still do the stuff they do now, but a bit more of what we like, then they are encouraging us to like writing. (Mana)

Mana recognised a balanced approach to writing instruction that navigates between teacher directed lessons and topics and what the boys like. The combination of the two approaches can occur when teachers and students share purposeful and common interests within the school environment that are relevant, meaningful and purposeful topics, as these two boys explained in reference to their favourite piece of writing:

We did a letter and it was for scooters, because our principal was going to ban them and I didn't want them to ban them. I did lots. (Simon)

I've got one which is my 'Scooters should be banned'. I feel like I had an opinion that really mattered and a voice, like, that would be with everyone, and something that they should really pay attention to. (Tama)

Gadd and Parr (2016) investigated the meaningfulness of writing tasks in reference to task orientation and effective teaching of writing. One teacher from their study believed that effective lessons were in part due to purposefulness, being open-ended and connected to the students' own lives. Making links to students' prior interests, experiences or knowledge is claimed to develop engagement in the writing tasks (Graves, 1983). Furthermore providing self-selected topic choice or contributing to the choices made by the teachers may enhance the child's perceptions of the meaningfulness of the task. (Gadd & Parr, 2016). Recent research findings indicate that self-selected writing topics and choice for writers is an area that requires further investigation (Beard & Burrell, 2010; Gadd, 2014; Hawkin & Certo, 2014). This concurs with the Ministry of Education's advice that "As well as completing teacher-directed writing tasks, students need time to write for their own purpose" (MOE, n.d).

#### **4.3 The Official and Unofficial Worlds of Writing**

The theme of the official and unofficial curriculum (Dyson, 1997) refers to the apparent discrepancies between what the boys perceive as relevant and acceptable writing practices and content as opposed to adults' perceptions of appropriate literacy practices within the school context. Multiple and varying perceptions of literacy exist depending on the context; for example, real world literacy practices such as text messaging as opposed to school based literacy practices such as writing a report. At times, the realms of literacy valued by the boys in this study were in opposition to the official curriculum. John illustrates the division between curriculum writing and writing of his choice. He appears to perceive these as unconnected practices in the following statement:

I love writing and I would do writing everyday but I would rather do free write than normal write. I would rather do free write for the whole day than just do writing. (John)

Free write, that is writing of his choice, is perceived as separate from normal write. John is passionate about writing but not normal school writing. There is an apparent disconnect between the writing practices of the official curriculum (normal write) and the unofficial curriculum (free

write). Frank provides another example; when asked to select and share his favourite piece of writing he explained the reason for his choice:

It is about this movie called *Suicide Squad*. I chose it because it has a lot of action and like shooting stuff. It is a story about it. I did it in free time. Mr Thompson will let us go on the Chromebooks and do writing on it. I never really write stuff like this cos we are never really allowed and it is just cool that I can write about what I like or what I want to. (Frank)

The image of writing as uncool was discussed by Mr Thompson:

For some boys, it's not cool. I've got a few boys this year and they're in this sort of 'it's not cool to write' thing. (Mr Thompson)

However, Frank acknowledges that the importance of choice of topic, control and the ownership of his writing is what makes his writing “cool”. He selected a story written about a recently released movie and outlined the action. Frank previously stated he had difficulty getting started and selecting a topic of his choice during a free write. This contradiction may be explained by the significant impact of popular cultural material upon Frank’s subject choice. He may have recently seen the movie *Suicide Squad* or been discussing this with his peers. Therefore, it was relevant at the time. Frank may have been identifying himself with this movie to reinforce his sense of self and image that was ‘cool’ through his alignment with and knowledge of a popular and heavily marketed cultural product.

Frank also stated: “I never really write stuff like this cos we are never really allowed”. This writing is at odds with the usual school literacy practices. Both John and Frank are currently below the National Standard in Writing, yet both boys are motivated to write when they are given choice and time. Both boys indirectly referred to the unofficial and official versions of literacy that exist within the school context (Dyson, 1993). Furthermore, the use of choice when selecting a writing topic emerged as a motivating factor for these two writers. The benefits of motivation are well documented, including endurance, less procrastination, greater self-regulatory skills and higher achievement (Hall & Goetz, 2013).

Conflicting or multiple perceptions of literacy can mean that certain literacies within the school context can be valued or privileged over other forms of literacy (Bausch, 2014). Furthermore, if some are valued over others, this may result in the undervaluing of some types of literacies. For example, references to popular culture content and products were apparent in the boys' writing. Marsh and Millard (2000) claim that children's popular media is saturated in violence, from superheroes to video games. It follows that, if the popular media that boys are exposed to contains violence, then violence within their writing could be encountered. Within the New Zealand context, the acceptance of violence in boys' writing is dependent to some extent on the values of particular schools, individual teachers, the context of the writing and the level of violence. Prohibition and censorship of violence in boys' writing is criticised by Newkirk (2000) who claims that boys can differentiate between real violence and violence for the sake of action and momentum in their stories as a literary device. He also claims that using superheroes and video games within writing is a way of playing out power relationships. Furthermore, Newkirk claims that by prohibiting writing topics we limit boys' ability to process and understand the world. In the comment below Robert is negotiating the differing perspectives and views of home and school:

If I write about playing *Call of Duty* in my weekend and it is R16, then I am not allowed to write about it. My teacher says, "kids shouldn't be playing those games" but parents don't see a problem with it. I mean there is no swearing only just a bit of blood. (Robert)

The boys possessed differing attitudes on what teachers would perceive as acceptable or non-acceptable levels of violence in their writing. This is illustrated in a group discussion (which followed a group free write activity) when the boys were asked about what teachers would think of the writing and violence in their stories:

Mana: If you are writing about killing something that is made up, like an alien or something it is not that bad but if you are writing about people dying or being silly about it, then yeah If you were writing something like somebody's diary of World War 1 or World War 2 they



wouldn't mind that because that's history and you're learning. But if it was just people being killed for the sake of killing...

Mark: Aliens and robots aren't that bad because they are not real. So, that's okay.

John: Some games are appropriate games like *Minecraft*. Some people think it is violent in a way, like killing zombies, but it doesn't show any blood, a guy just falls to the ground.

Here the boys are negotiating and navigating between a child's perception of what adults perceive as acceptable literacy practice, i.e. the child's world as opposed to an adult world. This is further illustrated in the following discussion during the collaborative writing session about stories and what the boys call the 'random' factor in their stories. The 'random' factor refers to a somewhat surreal type of humour that displays characteristics of absurdism and nonsense:

Richard: It's about the attack of the giant farts (everyone laughs)

Researcher: Why did you decide to write about that?

Richard: I am pretty soccery [sic] but Simon doesn't like that stuff but I am also quite random and Simon is random too.

When asked about teachers' perception of random stuff in their writing, Mana said: "Teachers wouldn't like random stuff. They don't really like it". Robert supported this opinion and said that the teachers would be "pretty disappointed". However, Richard's opinion differed; he argued that it was within the realm of 'kids' writing and that was acceptable: "I reckon they wouldn't mind it, because that is something that a teacher would expect from a kid, but if it was an adult then it would be pretty weird". This conversation appears to illustrate that the realms of acceptable writing are being frequently negotiated during writing. One of the teachers also referred to the differing worlds or thoughts of adults and children: "We teach it (writing) as adults don't we and they are kids. Something happened today and we thought that's adult thinking and adult talking". (Ms Smith)

During Richard's initial interview he was asked what his teacher thought was good writing and he stated:

My teacher thinks that, like, the non-serious stuff, like the kid writing is...she likes sort of political stuff.

When probed further Richard clarified what kids' writing was compared to adults' writing:

Kids' writing is something where anything can happen and adults writing it is just a boring old report about, like, I don't know, 'John Key became President'.

Newkirk (2000) explored the acts of rebellion in writing by boys as a means to define the world they would accept for themselves and in the creation of their identity. Robert addressed the power relationship with teachers setting the writing topic when he described what his teacher believed good writing was:

Whatever he sets us really. He thinks it's good writing, yet we could all say different. Some of that stuff is really boring. Really boring like writing about a topic. We have to write about the Olympics. (Robert)

Interestingly, Robert selected his recent piece of writing based on the Olympics as his favourite. This could be influenced by several factors. Firstly, it was his most recent writing so featured more predominately for him; secondly, he was proud of his achievement, although at the time he felt resistant to the act of writing it.

Another example that highlights this exploration of boundaries occurred in the second writing session, which focused on collaborative writing:

Robert: We always write about stories but we never get the chance to write about a play.

Charlie: Also when we see a play in a book we ask the teacher could we read the play when we have finished our book and they generally say no.

Robert: So sad. It is hard writing them because you have to think what's going to happen and who is sad and there is usually a problem.

Mana: We have come up with the characters and what the setting is going to be so at this point we have got... You can tell her Tama.

Tama: What a great day and then Deez Nuts pops up and says 'Deez Nuts'. Our characters are Deez Nuts and John Cena.

Researcher: What would your teacher think?

Tama: At some points he would laugh at it but at some points he would be.. disappointed.

Robert: Because of the name 'Deez Nuts' and that...he may not know what it means.

Piripi: Then he would search it up.

Mana: We would probably get in trouble because we are not allowed to say 'Deez Nuts' in class.

Researcher: Why did you write that here?

Ned: We were free writing and it feels like we can write what we want.

#### **4.4 Stories, the Virtual World and Popular Culture**

The importance and significance that the boys placed on the writing of stories was evident in this research. The world of stories provides a place to explore their identity and imagination and has personal significance for the writer. The writing of stories was referred to by some of the boys as their perceived writing strength and or a source of enjoyment. Stories also featured predominantly in their selection of their favourite piece of writing. This theme was developed using data from the initial interviews, the group discussions, and through the study of favourite selected stories.

In total, there were six boys who referred to the telling of stories as their preferred writing choice and the reason as to why they enjoyed writing.

My favourite part of writing. I like writing stories. It is really fun because I can let my imagination run wild...I am good at writing stories. (Tama)

Probably writing chapter books. (John)

I like reports and free write made up stories. (Ben)

I am not very good at my spelling but I am good at writing stories and making it sound really like you can get a picture in your head, like you are writing for little kids or something like that. (Frank)

I quite like making up stories and sometimes like doing stuff that's real. (Paul)

Probably about my weekends and making up stories and stuff like that. (Robert)

I like some different parts of writing like make-up writing imagination. (Simon)

Many of the boys perceived the writing of stories as important and relevant to them despite the focus on writing across the curriculum that was described by the teachers: “We link it across the curriculum to our theme. This week is around Olympics and different cultures so the logical thing is how to write a report.” (Mr Rodgers); “Lots of writing across the curriculum.” (Ms Clark). Or as another teacher explained:

Writing has many different purposes. That’s always helpful for the kids to know. I think that we just don’t have writing at writing time. That it is, writing all the time for different purposes so we try to bring that in and talk to them about it. (Ms Smith)

When asked to select their favourite pieces of writing, six boys selected a story they had written during a time when they were given the opportunity to free write within the classroom context. Of the twelve boys, seven boys selected narratives from either a free write or an in-class set topic. Four boys’ narratives were based on video games or movies, one boy selected a fantasy narrative written with a buddy and started the previous year, two boys selected a retell or parody of a fairy tale from an in-class set topic, one boy chose a personal recount from the previous year, two boys chose a persuasive text regarding skateboarding at school, and one boy selected a report on the Olympics, a current piece of writing that had just been completed. Another boy complained that he was unable to choose as this was too difficult. He was given the opportunity to select two pieces as his favourites. As the other boys were sure of their choices, there was only one boy who selected two writing samples. He chose his most recent Olympic report and a narrative:

I chose my *Hiwi the Kiwi* story and my report. It was a made-up story you had to do about fishing, and fishing for the future so like looking after the ocean and being safe in the sea. I liked my descriptive words and how I described lots of things. I mentioned heaps of things about water safety. (Mana)

These results appear to contrast with Maynard and Lowe's (1999) study that concluded that boys were resistant to narratives. As stated earlier, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and Newkirk (2000) claimed boys are more inclined to write narratives aligned with television, video and computer games, and for the acceptance of parody, sports, cartoons and gaming culture, which he labelled 'cultural material' in their writing. During the second writing session, the boys were given the opportunity to collaboratively free write. My field notes read as follows:

I hear the sound of numerous random associations and images or characters from the media such as Jeff, Francis and John Cena along with Lionel Messi. All these I recognise as YouTube celebrities or soccer players from my two boys at home. (Writing Session 2)

Some of the boys appeared to support the claim that fiction should be action-based and contain elements of humour and parody, as the following quote from this writing session illustrates:

Boys would have been like...do we have to do this ...please stop..., and for some of the boys it got turned into zombie apocalypse rather than dogs on the beach. (Paul).

Illustrating this further was the written feedback from one boy to the other in which he advised: "have a bit of action" (Paul). Tommy also claimed: "I like action". Frank stated: "I chose it because it has a lot of action". Parody was also mentioned in the selection of a favourite piece of writing: "It is basically the *Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf*. Instead of falling into the fire there is a bar fight" (Paul). Another story that was selected was considered to be "pretty fun and gross at the same time" (Simon). Tama also stated the reason he selected his favourite story was because it had "humour in it". The boys appeared to reinforce some of the components that Newkirk (2000) claimed are typical of boys' narrative writing, namely parody, humour and action.

References to the virtual worlds or video gaming culture were apparent in four of the boys' self-selected samples of their favourite piece of writing. These virtual worlds or gaming cultures also featured in writing completed during the collaborative writing sessions. It is apparent that

some of the boys' identities are strongly associated with the virtual world. John demonstrated this with his simple introduction: "My name is John and my hobby is video games". Ben stated his interests are "video games and learning about movies such as *Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*"; for Tommy his interest was "playing the Xbox". Mark simply stated his interest as "gaming". In John's case, his teacher demonstrated awareness of John's passions and acknowledged the importance of knowing one's learner and their individual interests: "Working on their passions, you know like for John we need to be in the virtual world." (Ms Smith)

Ben's example of his favourite piece of writing clearly demonstrated the interplay of the virtual and imaginary worlds and how he connects these to his story writing and sense of identity by placing himself in the first person. As his unedited story demonstrates below.

#### Simulator

I was a test subject for EFH labs. I filled in the apply form and hopped in the simulator and found myself in a zombie apocalypse left right and center they came for me I got a pixelated gun and shot the zombies BANG! I got through that level I went through other levels such as the haunted house level and the disaster level with meteors volcanoes and earthquakes but in the hacker's secret lair he hacked the simulator and it exploded!

The world of gaming, imagination, reality and fantasy all come into play in Ben's writing. In response to why he selected this piece of writing as his favourite, Ben replied: "It's really technologists...not really sci-fi ...it is like virtual reality characters, virtual zombies, virtual reality people come and take the city and that's what it is all about".

The world of gaming is also evident in John's favourite story, which was based on *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is a digital game where users create their own experience in a virtual landscape. Players dig (mine) and build (craft) a virtual world in which they encounter various challenges (Oakley, n.d). John articulated why he like this piece of writing: "My Minecraft thing, because it is like saying 'you' instead of this guy. So if you close your eyes, it is like you are imagining it". What

he liked about his writing was the use of second person, a concept quite sophisticated for a below National Standard writer. Here is the sample of John's unedited writing:

#### Minecraft

Minecraft is a peaceful game with cows pigs sheep and chickens as the sun goes down you feel the bres of the wind as the moon rises you get colder the hisss and the brr and the roar of dragon wanting to fight you the sun rises the frost melts away and all of the flowers come out to say yay as you walk thru the grass you feel the wind of the cave down down down in the deep cave you here hisss you run as fast as you can you fall into a dungeon you walk through the dungeon you her hisss you feel scared you don't have a sword as you walk around the corner a big roar!

This writing sample and John's latest asTTle (MOE, 2003) exemplar writing piece (Appendix J) based on a story starter, 'The day things started disappearing', provide a simple comparison between a piece of writing John was required to complete and one he self-selected. In the self-selected piece of writing both his content and use of language was more descriptive. There was also a clear sense that he was engaged as a writer and aware of the reader. In contrast, his required exemplar piece demonstrated repetitive use of language and a sense that the John was not fully engaged in the writing process as this example illustrates:

It was a lovely day at school then things started disappearing all the chairs all the tables and the pepole [*sic*] all the house all the schools it went back in time all that was left was my house my friends me and my dog and shops and my friends family and my family and food and candy all the shops were empty.

This could be explained by the difficulties of snapshot exemplar assessment, as it is dependent on many factors at the time of assessment. However, I believe it reflects the engagement, motivation and the vested interest the writer has in the writing along with his love and passion for the virtual world. Gee (2003) stated that the interweaving of character, plot, and problem solving apparent in gaming culture develops active and critical thinking that should be integrated into 21st century classrooms. It seems that the multiple identities available in the virtual world and imagined worlds help some of the boys in this study to make sense of and understand and navigate their identities in the real world. This is further supported by Alloway & Gilbert (1997), Gee (2003), Millard (1997) and Newkirk (2000).

#### **4.5 Collaboration and the Social World of Writing**

Writing is a social activity and through writing the boys are helping to establish their social world, making friendships, establishing and reflecting upon a sense of identity and negotiating relationships (Dyson, 1997; Newkirk, 2000). This social world of writing provides a purpose for writing, that is, the social interaction with others in both the real world and imagined world of stories. The boys in this study employed multiple roles of student, peer, writer, friend and characters within each other's stories. Dyson (1993) suggests that writing is a form of social interaction and is a way of creating and maintaining friendships. She describes this phenomena as 'social work'. That is the bond and friendship that occurs around writing sessions. This was particularly evident in one session when Tama asked: "Is it okay if I use your name?". "Sure", came the reply from Paul, "It's not copyrighted". The boys wanted to include each other in their stories, to merge their world of reality and fantasy, and to establish friendships and relationships. This reference to writing as a means to develop and maintain relations with others was mentioned by two boys in their initial interviews. Simon stated that he liked imaginative writing for developing friendships:

Imagination, because I like people and I want to try and meet them so I want to write imaginative stories so I can pretend I am there with them.

When John was asked if he liked sharing his writing, his answer demonstrated that he perceived the sharing of stories as a means to develop friendships: "Yes, I would like to get more friends and would like people to like me". Furthermore, John thought that working with a buddy would be good because, "when I do my chapter books they can choose their lines that they want to have because it has to be part of the story line". He perceived a role for a buddy within these stories but most importantly they would be required to be part of the story line.



The notion of collaboration and working with a buddy was referred to both in the writing sessions and focus group interviews. Tama, who is currently meeting National Standards in Writing, explained the reason for his selection of his favourite piece of writing as follows:

It was started last year in a free write that X and I started. We just got really into it. I was the one who was writing and X was fixing it up and we swapped over and it was really fun. I think I like it because I used a buddy to help me with it. I have been going on it for a long time since last year and it's got humour in it. Chapter 2. Breakfast is really funny. (Tama)

Tama's story was developed during free time using the Chromebook in conjunction with a buddy who was working below the National Standard in Writing. This piece of writing was constructed over a two-year period. Its appeal for Tama was both in the collaboration process and the humour of the story. Gadd (2014) suggests that learners need opportunities to work collaboratively and co-operatively with each other for both engagement and to develop self-regulatory skills.

Collaboration also enables the boys to discuss ideas and spark off one another as the following dialogue from a group writing session demonstrates. They are also including themselves in the story.

Ben: I think we should write about drones because you can use them to...

Mark: To fly them around.

Piripi: You can spy on people.

Mark: Sometimes you can get ones with cameras.

Piripi: My brother got one with lasers.

Ben: I am supposed to get a drone for my birthday.

Mark: We should do drones.

Piripi: That should be our title write it down.

P & M: Drones!

Ben: Don...don..don.

(Five minutes later:)

Ben: We have decided the name Drone Invasion 2016 and we are all something. I am an evil scientist and those two (points to his buddy) are drones.

Mark: The drones' mission is to bring Ben to prison which looks like a tropical island but he is actually in Antarctica.

Piripi: (He points to a drawing in their books) That's evil master Ben.

Mark: He has seven little laser guns things. It's gonna be sort of like a play.

Piripi: (Laughs) Yeah, sort of.

Newkirk (2000) claimed that within the collaborative story writing context, multiple worlds are at play; this involves using outside expertise, visual representation, a toy or video culture, friendship and the social world, as well as the curriculum culture and following the structure of writing. The boys in the example above thought about the title and the type of writing, illustrated the story, and used outside expertise on drones.

When asked about the frequency and opportunities to buddy write, the answers from the boys varied. From the following comments one could conclude that buddy writing is not typical classroom practice, but occurs sometimes: "Nah, not very often" (John), "sometimes yeah" (Ben), "no, we usually write by ourselves and then talk to a buddy or the teacher" (Mana) and "We get quite lots" (Paul).

There are benefits in collaborative writing as two of the boys demonstrated: "It is good because you can talk to them about your ideas. It makes it a lot easier writing" (Simon), and "I like it because you can share ideas and sometimes your buddy has really good ideas and sometimes they like your ideas and it is more fun than writing by yourself" (Paul).

The use of buddies for feedback was also mentioned by the boys. Tama stated: "I think buddies are cool for writing your feedback because you can ask them why they said that. You can also ask the teachers but it is just a bit more nerve-racking". Peer feedback and collaboration is considered

to be effective when the children are scaffolded by the teacher to give and receive feedback (Gadd, 2014).

One teacher discussed the importance of collaborative planning, teaching, and reflecting in the on-going development as a teacher of writing. This is her current classroom practice as she team teaches with another teacher:

There is so much we can do with writing. Collaboration. Talking with other people. I think my writing is a lot better now that I'm working with another teacher and not just on my own in a class. That whole sharing thing is really important. Hey, I'm just one person and I have my beliefs and my way of doing things so if it is shared around it makes such a difference. I think that was the neat thing about the teachers going around and observing each other. (Ms Smith)

#### **4.7 Gender and Writing**

The boys' and their teachers' perceptions of gender within writing content and approach are addressed in this finding. Some of the boys and the teachers believed there were distinct gender biases in the stories that children write:

There's definite gender differences and it's almost cliché in some ways. If we're writing stories you can guarantee that a lot of the girls will go into almost the whole fairy tales land with princesses and unicorns. Boys will go the complete opposite direction and there will be aliens and gun battles and you know the Wild West. (Mr Rodgers)

It would be the same when you gave them choices for anything if you are looking at reports. I mean the girls would generally choose horse riding or a female athlete for the Olympics, for example. I can guarantee that most of the girls in my class will pick a girl to look at if they are going to do something there. They will look at things like the horse riding and the athletics whereas the boys would turn around and they'll have a look at the shot put and the javelin, running, weightlifting and that kind of thing. Something that is perceived to be ...to have that macho kinda feel to it, they tend to be drawn to it. (Mr Rodgers)

This teacher was aware of the gender perceptions and the need for the boys to identify with a 'macho' construct. This 'macho' context was also addressed in another classroom which was also writing reports based around the Olympics:

Like at the moment we are doing the Olympics, so the boys I have are all into shooting, hunting and gathering and that kind of thing. All these bush lads. So, we went (ohhh) Olympic shooting event, and so we are talking about mathematical things how heavy is the gun and how far do they have to shoot... all these technical principles which seemed to engage a lot of boys with the engineering side of things. (Mr Thompson)

When discussing narrative and stories Tommy suggested: “Girls want to write about pretty pink princesses”. When discussing the writing exemplar, Paul stated: “the girls would have really like that... ‘aw cute doggy woggies’ and the boys would have been like ‘do we have to do this’ ”.

Dyson (1997) suggests socially constructed gendered roles are learned, enacted and reaffirmed through the public performance. Therefore, gender roles will be apparent in children’s writing as they ‘play out’ the social expectations. At one point, the stereotyping of girls was discussed directly by the other boys during a focus group discussion:

Richard: It is actually quite hard because it depends on what they like.

Tommy: Yeah, if they’re a tomboy or just a plain girl.

Piripi: They (girls) want to write about whatever they want, cos whatever you like, you are gonna wanna write about, cos who doesn’t like writing about what you like.

It appeared these boys were addressing some of the stereotypical representations of gender and had an understanding of individual preferences. Interestingly, the comment “tomboy or just a plain girl” allowed for two definitions or types of female gender construct. Millard (1997) argued it was more acceptable for girls to be perceived as tomboys than for boys to cross gender boundaries. The following conversation occurred regarding a teacher directed writing lesson based on the theme of fairy tales as a writing genre within the classroom context:

Tommy: I don’t like it when I have to make up a fairy tale. It is a bit odd and not really me.

Robert: That’s more a girl thing. Girls like it. Girls prefer it.

Mana: Boys are more mixed.

Mark: Yeah, we made up a fairy tale which sucked.

It may be that the boys were aware that fairy tales were at odds with accepted notions of masculinity. Therefore, they were asserting their male gender identity by belittling fairy tales and stating they “sucked”. Interestingly, two boys in this study selected a story based on an adapted fairy tale as their favourite or most significant piece of writing. However, both boys selected a fairy tale with male characters: *Jack and the Beanstalk* and the *Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf*. They were able to parody and adapt the fairy tales and make them become more stereotypically masculine, as this example from Paul’s story demonstrates: “So that night he snuck up to the Wolf’s home and placed TNT under the house. Boom!”

Another group discussion arose regarding whether boys or girls were more likely to enjoy writing. In this conversation, Mana acknowledged the gender of authors, and Mark and Piripi referenced personal interest or passions as a motivating factor for writing:

Mana: I would say there are more famous writers who are boys than famous writers that are girls.

Mark: It depends on what the boy likes to do.

Tommy: I think girls prefer it.

Robert: Like farm children, like people who grow up on farms they don’t particularly like to write. I didn’t grow up on a farm but I don’t like to write either.

Piripi: I guess if writing is their passion and what they want to do.

Teachers were also aware of stereotypes and generalisations in the context of gender discussions. One teacher stated during their interviews: “Obviously, this is very stereotypical”, before he described some of the boy writers.

Boys seem to not enjoy writing as much. It probably is that they’d rather be outside running around and doing that type of thing than sitting still at a desk or whether it be in our modern learning environment here lying down or whatever. It is just the attention span possibly. (Mr Thompson)

The concept of limited attention span was also referred to by Robert in the initial interview when he described what a good writer is: “Probably mostly the girls are because they sometimes, most of them stay focused unlike us boys we don’t really. We talk about what we do in our weekends”. This opinion that girls were more focused was also found in the research of Maynard and Lowe (1999). Two of the teachers in this study also felt that one of the challenges male writers faced in the classroom was the ability to focus and manage distractions within the classroom context. This was stated by Mr Thompson when working with learners who were described as below the National Standard in Writing:

Well, with the ALL (Accelerated Literacy Learning) programme, we have been doing for the last month or so, where we have our special group, I have got three boys. I had four but one left. I find that the biggest problem they have is if I send them off to do independent work. They get distracted, they get stuck, and they get lost. If I sit with them they achieve better work. (Mr Thompson)

This view was further supported by Mr Rodgers:

We have an ALL (Accelerated Literacy Learning) group for our writers who are below. They work here in the cabin. We found that most of our kids who are ‘below’ children and some that need a little bit more concentration, a little bit more focus. They are in a small room with a small group of kids. (Mr Rodgers)

Two of boys in the initial interviews, both of whom were achieving ‘at’ standard, referred to remaining focussed as a weakness during writing, as these comment show:

Probably staying focused and that...getting distracted a lot (Robert)

I think one of my main writing goals is not getting so distracted, because I can get distracted. If it is not my favourite kind of writing, I kinda go off a lot easier than when it’s stories and stuff because I really stay on track. (Tama)

During an in-class observation one teacher referenced focus and remaining on task, as noted in the following field comment.

Mr Thompson looks at Frank and says, “Make sure you have a full stop”, then he asks him “Where are you going next with your story and remember to stay focused”. (Observation Number 1 of Mr Thompson)

One teacher’s opinion appeared to support the concept that the quality of teaching rather than the gender of the teacher was important:

I think a lot of kids love having male teachers around. That’s cool to see that. But, I think every teacher is unique in their own way and they bring whatever they bring and the kids can learn from that. So, I don’t think there is any better or worst in terms of just pure gender. I am sure there are better teachers than others but that is a different topic. As long as you have the passion and motivation to do the best you can do. If you got that as a teacher you are going to do well. (Mr Thompson)

Mr Rodgers addressed the challenge related to selecting clichéd gender topics to motivate and encourage boys to write:

I guess again it’s finding something to write about, trying to encourage them to write and also it’s kind of like, how much do you skew it. You could skew it all to the boys and then the girls start going, “motorbikes again”. (Mr Rodgers)

It appeared that the teachers were aware of some of the gender issues within the classroom contexts. They were cautious about using boy friendly teaching methods and gender skewing (Martino, 2003; Martino & Berrill, 2003). They also addressed the concept of the quality of the teachers rather than the gender of the teacher.

The perceptions that the teachers had of boys in terms of enjoyment of writing topics were as follows:

Boys, I mean without going into a specific genre, but they like the non-fiction space stuff definitely. If you gave me a choice to do research or a report or write a story of your own choice they tend to lean towards that non-fiction side of things. (Mr Rodgers)

So definitely it needs to be something technical or explaining how things work. I have found in the past has also engaged a lot of the boys. (Mr Thompson)

The use of specific writing topics for boys was explored in an interview with some of the boys. The responses were different depending on the individual learner, as the following conversation demonstrates:

Researcher: Some people say boys like writing about how things work.

Tama: No, I like letting my imagination run wild.

Robert: Yeah, you could base it on how a car works. How something works yeah.

Simon: It was fun selling a product.

Teachers also discussed the need to transmit the joy of writing to boys and to display enthusiasm for writing:

I am trying to encourage particularly boys to really see the joy in writing and communication and the importance. I think a lot of the boys go: “Why do I need to write, I’m gonna play rugby” or you know they have these other ideas what they want to do that doesn’t incorporate writing. So, it is just trying to be enthusiastic about writing with them is probably one of my strengths. (Mr Thompson)

You just want to get them to enjoy writing don’t you and not to be put off. (Ms Smith)

Regarding the boys' opinions and attitudes towards writing, the responses were generally positive, for example: “I think writing is really fun” (Simon), “Well, I like writing cos it’s really fun” (Frank), “Actually pretty fun” (Ben), and “I love writing” (John). Interestingly, none of the boys who were below National Standard in Writing stated they did not like writing. This suggests that enjoyment of writing remains even though writing may be an area of need. Surprisingly, dislike was stated by one boy who was working above National Standard in Writing, and by another two boys who were working at National Standard level in writing, who answered: “not so sure” (Tama) and “I’m not that interested” (Paul). It appeared the link to enjoyment here is unrelated to achievement levels.



These findings partly contrast with what the teachers believed were the challenges that struggling male writers faced within the classroom context. A common theme for the teachers was the role of self-belief and confidence in terms of the enjoyment of writing or writing issues for these boys. The following comments were made by each of the teachers, separately in response to the interview question, “What are some of the challenges struggling male writers face?”

They have just been knocked back for it, because we don't think they are capable of it. But they are actually. They are! They are, because they are good thinkers. (Ms Smith)

I think we are making them write too early and it just puts a switch for those who are just not ready for it. It switches into negative association with writing”. (Ms Clark)

It's a confidence thing. They perceive themselves as bad writers, therefore, they think people think they're bad writers and it's a whole negative sort of thing. So I think, it's building up that confidence, building up vocabulary and building them and encouraging them. You know that, “You can do it”. That's the biggest issue I think we have with the kids. It is their perceptions, whether that's coming from within themselves or something someone has said or comparing themselves to other people, I don't know it is difficult to put a finger on it sometimes. (Mr Rogers).

If I say to this child you are below the standard when they are little and then they get it the next year but they have made progress some of them think, “I suck at this why do I bother?” That's what their inner voice is telling them. (Mr Smith)

In this study, the children who were below National Standard in Writing enjoyed writing. A number of factors could potentially explain this contradiction between teacher and learner perceptions. This could possibly include feelings of unease that teachers may experience when having to report National Standards to the child, perhaps the teachers perceive this as having a greater impact on their learners. Perhaps it reflects issues that surround self-belief as opposed to self-regulatory skills or simply a child's positive attitude towards writing, a small sample size or an engaging writing programme. Some of these factors may or may not begin to explain this complex relationship.

#### **4.6 Surface Features, Spelling and Quantity of Output**

The role of spelling and the surface features known as print conventions -such as full stops, capitals, proper nouns, exclamation marks, letter formation and handwriting (MOE, 1996) - were

raised by two boys in the initial interviews when discussing their weaknesses. Tama stated: “Probably the spelling side of things because I’m not very good at the spelling side of things”, and Frank mentioned: ‘I am not very good at my spelling’. Tommy stated that a criterion for good writing was “Spelling. Most of the spelling is correct”. The theme of spelling and the mechanics of writing reoccurred throughout the writing sessions and during participant observations. This conversation took place during the fourth writing session, which focused on the skill of editing a piece of writing:

Robert: How do you spell soaked? .... How do you spell soaked?

Mana: What?

Robert: How do you spell it?

Piripi: I.T

Robert: c k

Mana: No, Cross out the c

Robert: So it’s k

Mana: Wait...soa... it’s soa

Piripi: You need to use a dictionary

Mana: k e d

Robert: I’ve got two words that I spelt wrong that I figured out, well Mana figured them out for me. I know I suck at spelling.

Mana: That means you need to get better.

Robert: Why do I need to get better at spelling. I’ve got the internet at home. I am better at spelling when I have the internet.

The conversation clearly mentions three strategies for editing in relation to correcting spelling errors. This included the use of a friend as an expert, which was emphasised again when Robert, in a group discussion, stated: “He helped me with heaps of things. He helped me fix up things like spelling words properly”. The use of a dictionary was also offered almost as a word of advice. This strategy was also referred to during the discussion on editing when Paul stated that editing

was “Looking up things in a dictionary”. John also mentioned dictionary use, although this was in relation to the challenge experienced looking up unfamiliar words:

If you look inside a dictionary sometimes they think that you already know a word but you don’t actually know it. It’s like you can’t find the word at all in there. They think you know it but they don’t put it in there. (John)

The third strategy raised related to the role of technology and the use of the internet as a spelling tool. Robert argued that the skill of spelling was unnecessary. This could have been for two reasons. Firstly, he claimed he “sucked at spelling”, so he did not care, and he did not care because he felt he was not good at it. This type of rationalisation is supported by John in another focus group discussion: “If it is maths I will try hard at it because I am good at it but if it something like writing I really don’t care. I don’t care”. Robert also stated in his initial interview: “We all get times that we can share but I don’t like sharing mine because I am not a good writer”. Robert believed he was not a good writer despite meeting National Standard in Writing. Secondly, it could be that Robert has no genuine interest in writing, or thirdly, that he is simply making a valid point considering the use of predictive texts options and technology as a tool for spelling.

During the fourth writing session, the discussion focused on editing and the responsibility for correcting errors. It seemed that one boy was teacher-reliant because it was easier: “I like doing it with a teacher because they write all the correct spelling on the top and it means you don’t have to do that much work” (Paul).

As spelling featured frequently during our discussions, I decided to explore the issue further by asking the boys what was more important, spelling or the ideas. Out of a group of twelve boys half raised their hands indicating spelling was the most important. The other half raised their hands for ideas. Some of their comments follow:

Mana: The reason people invented writing was to communicate. There is no point in having ideas if you can’t write them down properly.

Robert: What is the point of the ideas if you can't spell them.

Paul: If you are really good at spelling but have no ideas what are you going to write about? Whereas if you have ideas but you are terrible at spelling you can just get a dictionary or you can ask a buddy, or yourself or a teacher to check. If you only know how to spell, then you will just be writing spelling words.

Ben: I think spelling is important. If you have so many good ideas but are not very good at spelling what's the point of the ideas if you can't spell it.

Tommy: What is the point of having good spelling if you don't have ideas to write down. You can just grab a dictionary.

Robert: If you can't spell how are you going to find the correct spelling.

Mana: You need both.

When discussing the significance that the boys place on spelling, the teachers responded in a number of ways. Firstly, the visibility of spelling errors was addressed and secondly, the need to be right was discussed as these two statements illustrate:

It is hard to give feedback on ideas because that is subjective but surface features can be quite objective like you have either spelt it right or wrong. An idea is quite complex isn't it. (Mr Thompson)

Their biggest concern was that they didn't know and they were worried about being wrong. It was the same with their spelling they didn't like to take the risks because they were always worried about getting it wrong. Getting it wrong, they don't like it. I don't like it. (Ms Clark)

The majority of the teachers also believed that parents often focussed on spelling and that this was transmitted to the boys:

A lot of parents will look at their writing and go, "Oh you have to fix your spelling" and basically there is a lot of that from parents. (Ms Smith)

If we looked at our student conference things. That was a major one that kept coming back from our parents...spelling. Spelling. (Ms Clark)

"Spelling list, why don't they have a spelling list". But even when you show them the proof like the Schonell test that we do and your kid comes out at or above their age and look at how they are spelling the harder words and nearly all the letters are just slightly off or out. They still go on about the spelling. (Mr Rodgers)

Wray's (1993) research concluded that children thought surface features were the most important component of writing. Surface features are also known as the conventions of print or the mechanics of writing. The National Writing Project carried out in England in the 1990s found that children believed that the success of the writing was determined by its neatness, spelling and punctuation rather than the message or content. In reference to making explicit writing goals and feedback for students, Timperley and Parr (2009) stated the need for writers "to realise that writing is more than getting the punctuation and spelling right in long and neatly presented pieces" (p.58). Martin, Waters and Bloom's (1989) survey of 429 writers aged eleven years old ranked the order of what they perceived the teacher looked for in a piece of writing (cited in Wray, 1993). The results demonstrated that 42.2% ranked handwriting, neatness and presentation at the top of the list, followed by spelling at 25.4% and 15.8% for punctuation and grammar. Although this is an older study, it appeared that many of the boys in this study also identified surface features as the most important component of writing. When the students were asked in the initial interviews what good writing was and what the teacher looked for, the responses included:

Very tidy, got paragraphs and full stops and capital letters. (Mark)

Probably capitals and full stops and more sentences and much larger sentences. (John)

Full stops and capital letters all in the right place, paragraphs and everything. Spelling, most of the spelling is correct. (Tommy)

I think the people who know all their spelling and know every word that they are trying to put in, and don't have to think, sometimes but not all the time. (Tama)

Probably making full stops, capital 'I's, and adding detail and all that stuff that could make it better and even my handwriting. (Piripi)

Writing goals that the students wrote in their writing books to indicate next learning steps also appeared to focus on the surface features of a piece of writing. John, for example, said his goal was "Capital letters, full stops, commas and that stuff".

When discussing the emphasis that the boys place on surface features, one teacher stated that "Surface features leap out at us" (Mr Thompson). Another teacher referred to the writing in the

students' books: "In the book it is red or green. When they look at the book they don't always read the comments, they just see the red and green" (Ms Clark). The following comment was made by another teacher with reference to parents:

When parents do come in and read their writing, very few people go, "that was an amazing idea, see how you have written it...or could you have changed that sentence to make it sound more dramatic". Very few parents say that to a child whereas that is what we probably say. (Ms Smith)

The amount of writing produced within a given time frame was regularly referred to by the students and many appeared to link the amount written to the quality of the writing. In reference to good writing and his writing goals, Mark stated: "Doing hard work and doing a couple of pages" and "Adding detail and doing it really fast and doing heaps". Paul also commented on the amount when referring to a piece of writing he was proud of: "it was entertaining and it was one of the longest pieces I did".

Even though he was meeting National Standards in Writing, Robert identified himself as a poor writer because of the amount he produced: "Mainly because I don't get, like the standard done, like, I probably get ten sentences done yet other people have got like two pages or something like that". He also stated good writing was "lots and lots of sentences probably two to three pages". Both writers who were considered above the National Standard in Writing also referred to the amount of writing. Richard stated: "My goal is probably to write a bit more, yeah". Mana said his goal was "Probably writing quickly and at least, like, a page and a half long".

The following conversation, which occurred during a class observation of a writing session, appears to illustrate the emphasis placed on the quantity of writing by two of the boys:

Robert: How many sentences have you got?

Mana: Three.

Robert: That's only one full stop. Super bad and terrible. (He counts the number of words he has written) I've got 54 words. See if you can beat me.

Mana: I have done 15 words in one sentence.

The reluctance to begin writing and producing a limited output is often referred to as a 'struggling writer' issue (Glasswell et al., 2003). However, it appeared in this study to be an issue across all achievement levels. Only one boy out of the twelve in this study suggested that quantity was irrelevant: "I think good writing is not so much quantity but more quality". (Tama)

#### **4.7 Summary**

Chapter Four presented the thematic findings of this research interwoven with relevant discussion and references to corresponding research. The first theme of choice and the free write illuminated the importance that the boys placed on ownership and control of their writing topics and content. The concept of choice is linked with autonomy and engagement (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995; Graves, 1983; Hall & Goetz, 2013; Kohn, 2000). Choice and self-selected topics can enhance the meaningfulness that some writers attach to the writing. This can also be achieved through writing about the students' experiences and interests (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). As Pirirpi stated, "I most like writing when it's about something that I like to do or something about myself".

The official and unofficial worlds of writing revealed a disconnect that occurs at times, between a child and an adult perception of appropriate or relevant writing content (Bausch, 2014; Dyson, 1997). As John stated, "I love writing and I would do writing everyday but I would rather do free write than normal write. I would rather do free write for the whole day than just do writing".

Writing stories and stories with references to the virtual world and popular culture played a predominant place in the boys' perceptions of the types of writing they enjoyed or considered their favourite. Stories were used as a source of enjoyment and as a means to navigate their

identity. The importance of co-operative and collaborative writing for some of the boys and enjoyment of writing with and for their peers was made apparent.

The findings around gender and writing demonstrated that concepts of masculinity and perceived gender divisions were still apparent in regards to writing. There was, however, an understanding of individuality in terms of writing. Spelling, surface features and quantity versus quality of output in writing all played a predominant part in the findings. The implication of the findings and recommendations will be addressed in Chapter Five.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

The overarching question this research sought to answer was: ‘What are the thoughts, perceptions and experiences of twelve Year 5 and 6 boys as writers?’ The literature review explored writing, gender politics and implications for teaching of writing. As mentioned in earlier chapters, steps have been taken, within the New Zealand context and internationally, to investigate the issue and recommendations have been made to narrow this gap (Alloway et al., 2002; Knowles & Smith, 2005; Marsh, 2003; Martino, 2003; Maynard, 2002; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; Reichert & Hawley, 2010; Smith & Wilhem, 2002; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Despite this, the disparity between boys’ and girl’s achievement levels in the field of writing remains an issue both internationally and within the New Zealand context. (ACARA, 2015; Education Counts, 2016; United Kingdom Department of Education, 2016; Weaver-Hightower, 2009). This small scale research in a New Zealand primary school sought to investigate the issue.

I employed a variety of qualitative methods, including individual interviews, group discussions, participant observations and writing sessions with the boys, as outlined in Chapter Three. Chapter Four analysed the results and identified the findings. In this concluding chapter, the findings will be summarised, and the implications for the future teaching and learning of writing will be discussed. The limitations of the study will also be addressed and recommendations made for future research. Finally, a concluding statement will be presented.

### **5.1 A Summary of the Findings**

Firstly, the male writers that participated in this study placed importance upon the freedom, choice and ownership of writing topics and content. Self-selecting writing topics or co-constructing topics that had some personal interest or had a perceived meaningful purpose were important for the boys’ enjoyment of, and the value they placed upon writing. The use of self-selected topics moves beyond the simplistic notion of ‘doing what I want’ to represent

autonomy, power, responsibility and self-regulation (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1995; Kohn, 2000). Students who have ownership of their writing are more likely to be engaged than those who do not (Graves, 1983; Vokoun & Bigelow 2005). Ownership develops self-regulatory practices, and the more choice students have, the more committed they are, and the more likely they are to persevere through challenges (Perry & Drummond, 2002). Furthermore, by self-selecting writing topics, the boys are exploring their social realities and the meaning they attach to their lives.

Secondly, it was evident that the boys were negotiating and navigating between the world of the official and unofficial curriculum. What was perceived as acceptable writing practice and content from the boys' perspective within the school context, was frequently deliberated. At times, a disconnection occurred between personal writing and school writing practices. This understanding that boys' writing perceptions differ from that of their teachers is a pertinent finding. Issues arise over addressing and bridging this divide to make writing more relevant for the boy writers.

Thirdly, the writing of stories was considered important to these nine to eleven-year-old male writers. The boys placed emphasis upon the genre of writing stories as both an individual and collaborative activity. The boys perceived stories as a means to develop and maintain social interactions and to develop and build relationships. This is in line with sociocultural theory that asserts that knowledge is not a product, but an understanding of the world, which is a socially constructed phenomena determined through human interactions (Blurr, 1995).

This study also appeared to support many of Newkirk's (2000) findings on male writers that found an emphasis on parody, popular culture, toys, humour, and the use of action. Popular culture, toys, film and video gaming infiltrated into the realms of the boys' writing. They placed value or importance upon this type of writing content. The use of popular culture is also considered a means to motivate and engage learners (Hagood, et al., 2010; Marsh 2003). The

boys sense of identity and self is explored through their stories based in these contexts (Dyson, 1997; Newkirk, 2000).

Gender is socially constructed and multiple concepts of masculinity were evident in the boys writing including hegemonic views of masculinity (Connell, 1996; Dutro, 2003; Skelton & Francis, 2003). This was evident in the perceived need to select 'macho' topics that reinforced stereotypical representations of gender. The findings also found that some boys recognised individual preferences and personal interests as a major factor contributing to writing choices and content rather than the gender of the writer. A sense of self or individuality allowed for variances from social norms and gender constructs. There was also an awareness of stereotyping and cautionary use of these gender norms by teachers.

Lastly, many of the learning goals and perceived weaknesses that the boys identified in this study were surface features such as spelling or punctuation and the quantity of writing produced within the given timeframe. Although these are important components within any writing programme there was little reference to the content or message of the writing and over emphasis on punctuation and spelling. This may be due to the transparent nature of spelling and identification of a capital letter as opposed to the enigmatic nature of ideas. The implications for teaching are best summed up in *Dancing with the Pen* (1996):

Although getting it right may be important, it is not the reason why writers write and share their writing. Teachers need to teach the writer not the writing through methods centred on them and their message. (MOE, p.16).

## **5.2 Implications for Classroom Practice**

I cannot claim that these findings can be generalised across the wider population and are typical of all boys and teachers in New Zealand schools. This is due to the fact that the sample group was from a single site school, comprising of a relatively small number of twelve students and four teachers. However, despite the sample size, this study provides some insights and implications

for the teaching of writing in schools. Teachers of writing need a multitude of strings to their respective bows to develop critical and competent writers, to engage and motivate learners, to assist learners to develop self-regulatory skills and critical self-analysis, and to build relationships with learners and their families. However, the over-arching lesson for this teacher and novice researcher was that teachers need to listen to the ideas and perspectives of the boys as writers. The twelve participating boys in this study could clearly articulate and express their thoughts, opinions and ideas on what they considered meaningful writing.

Within the classroom programme, students need time to write for themselves, their topics, their choices and to write with others. Teachers need to utilise the boys' world of literacy to teach and develop writing skills. It is necessary to recognise the boys' writing and to utilise boys' interest and themes, and to provide a place for their writing within the school context. This may begin to bridge the gap of what is perceived as school writing as opposed to their personal practice. This could be transferred into more meaningful experiences of writing and consequentially more enjoyment of the subject.

Writing is a social activity in which the boys navigate their friendships and relationships within the real and imagined worlds of print. It is necessary to provide boys with the time and space to explore writing as a social activity and to support one another in their learning. There is a social world of writing that needs to be valued within the school context. This social world could be utilised to teach and further develop the writers' tool kit and skills necessary to create competent writers. There is a place for stories. Stories were seen as an outlet for their imagination, a means to explore identity, relationships, to entertain and express creativity.

There is a need to utilise a critical literacy approach to writing within the classroom context. Teachers and students need to explore the multiple constructs of gender, including stereotypes and gender biases. When gender is left unexamined these practices have the potential to signal acceptance of gender-biased behaviours as the norm. Educators have recommended that teachers

provide a programme that broadens one's concept of masculinity. This means that alternative views of what masculinity is and the questioning of traditional roles should be addressed within literacy learning (Kehler & Martino, 2007).

Critical literacy also provides a vehicle to explore the myths or consumerism perpetuated through the use of popular culture material. Inherent contradictions can be explored, such as, what the boys perceive as personal or individual content and identity is somewhat influenced by popular culture and the media saturated environment they exist within. If the writing is saturated with references to popular culture then a critical approach to texts and images is necessary. Rowan et al., (2002) recommend five principles for use of popular cultural material in the classroom. This includes knowing children as they are, not what teachers want them to be, developing a clear understanding of how popular culture reinforces or challenges norms, awareness of the differences between groups of students, sensitivity to the enjoyment children have with popular texts, and for teachers to differentiate between the positive and negative inclusion of popular cultural materials.

### **5.3 Limitations of the study**

The sample size was small, focusing only on twelve boys with varying writing abilities and four teachers. The selection process was not random but a purposive group. Therefore, the results of this research must be addressed with caution. The limitation with a single site school and small sample is that, the results are specific to that site. Nevertheless, these findings provide an insight into the perceptions and motivations of twelve boys in a New Zealand state primary school and these may contain some relevance for other boys in their endeavours to become effective writers.

My researcher position was that of an insider teacher researcher. I have returned to my place of work, and the school where this research was undertaken, to teach in a Year 5 and 6 male composite class. Conducting research into one's workplace, students and school community

presents challenges, and a high degree of sensitivity is needed. Ethics governed all aspects of this study, including the selection of findings that were included or were not included.

As a novice researcher, my skills were continuously developing and, in retrospect, there are many aspects that I could have improved. At times, my questioning needed to probe deeper, my methods needed to be more systematic, and perhaps the focus narrowed, as I was often led astray by tangents and hunches. As a classroom teacher of all curriculum areas, and as a teacher of writing, I was interested in a broad range of approaches and methods in relation to writing. There were so many facets and angles to consider when investigating writing. Was I merely scraping the surface and losing the depth of focus and analysis? Would a more experienced researcher be able to observe aspects that I missed? The duration of the time spent in the field was relatively short, this meant that I was only able to observe one writing topic genre for the month I was in the field. Perhaps I needed to situate myself in the classroom context environment over the course of a day.

Although this study included three Māori students, and one Pasifika student, I did not explore their experiences through a cultural lens and perhaps a greater understanding of these boys' experiences would have been obtained by employing a more culturally relevant investigation and methodology (Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). For the ethnic background of the learner also plays a role. For example, within the New Zealand context, according to 2015 National Standards in Writing, just 61.6 % of Māori students and 60.6 % of Pasifika numbers were achieving at or above National Standard in Writing compared to 77.3 % of Pakeha students (Education Counts, 2016). Alton-Lee and Pratt (2000), also found that ethnic differences were more significant than gender differences in the achievement outcomes of literacy, science and mathematics. Other research also demonstrated that socio-economic factors play a significant role in the achievement level in literacy (Alloway et al., 2002; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Cuttance & Thompson, 2008; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Rowan et al., 2002; Skelton & Francis, 2003). Therefore, the links between the social-economic and cultural background of the male writers could be explored further.

## **5.4 Recommendations for Further Research**

Undertaking a larger study would build upon the knowledge found in this study. Further research is recommended into the concepts and themes of self-selected writing topics to bridge the gap between the differing perceptions of writing within the curriculum. Pedagogical interventions to enhance the use of self-selected topics in the development of self-regulatory skills or the ability to give and receive feedback within the realm of self-selected writing would also build upon the knowledge found in this small study. An intervention study based on the role of critical literacy in the analysis of self-selected writing samples would also add to this body of knowledge.

## **5.6 Final Thoughts**

As I write these final thoughts, I am once again teaching full time. This year 2017, I am teaching a Year 5 and 6 level in a collaborative class of 48 students at a New Zealand primary school. Through the completion of this thesis, I have gained a greater understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in this contentious issue of boys and writing. I also realise that there is no magic bullet or simple solution to address writing achievement levels for some boys. This is due to the fact that a complex myriad of factors are all at play from self-regulatory practices, feedback, effective teacher practices, relationships, motivation, engagement, direct teaching and community to name a few. I do, however, realise that small steps can be taken to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of boys as writers. One step is listening to their voices for these contain a valuable insight into their perceptions and experiences.

During this research, I did indeed gain insights and these will alter how I teach and perceive writing practice within the classroom context, now and in the future. Reflecting on this thesis (as I do in these final thoughts) feels less like the end of a process but the beginning of another, as I now implement what I have learnt into the classroom context. The importance of ownership and autonomy for these male writers and the value of their personal interests and stories became

apparent. Their interests, just as their personalities, vary. Some of the boys share a love of the virtual world and gaming culture, as a classroom teacher I must acknowledge and utilize this passion. I also need to equip my learners with an understanding of critical literacy and the numerous versions of what it means to be male within our social contexts.

I opened my eyes to the social world of writing and the importance the boys place on writing together and writing for each other. Sometimes in the act of teaching, it is difficult to step outside of oneself and to see the wider picture or the intricate social interactions that are at play. I need to value this social world of writing and provide time and opportunities within the class programme for this to be further explored and utilised. Lastly, I need to listen and value what the students have to say as Mana simply stated;

I think it is really important that the teachers know what we like. To do a bit more of what we like, you know to get us into writing. Still do the stuff they do now, but a bit more of what we like, then they are encouraging us to like writing (Mana).



## Appendix A: ERHEC Approval



### HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Rebecca Robinson  
Telephone: +64 03 364 2987, Extn 45588  
Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

Ref: 2016/35/ERHEC

29 July 2016

Jennifer Ward  
College of Education, Health & Human Development  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Jennifer

Thank you for providing the revised documents in support of your application to the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. I am very pleased to inform you that your research proposal "Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs - Ten Year 5 and 6 Male Writers and their Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences on the Learning and Teaching of Writing" has been granted ethical approval.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 21<sup>st</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> July.

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval, please let me know.

We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely

pp

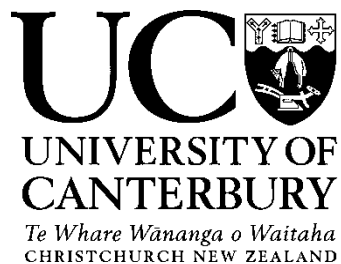
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'R. Robinson'.

Patrick Shepherd  
**Chair**  
**Educational Research Human Ethics Committee**

*Please note that ethical approval relates only to the ethical elements of the relationship between the researcher, research participants and other stakeholders. The granting of approval by the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee should not be interpreted as comment on the methodology, legality, value or any other matters relating to this research.*

F E S

## Appendix B: Information & Consent Form for Principal



Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

### **Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PRINCIPAL**

I am requesting your approval to approach some teaching staff and students at your school to invite them to be part of this study. My name is Jenny Ward and I am a Masters student from the University of Canterbury College of Education, Health and Human Development department. I have been a primary school classroom teacher for 12 years and I am currently on study leave to conduct research into the perceptions and experiences of twelve male writers in Year 5 and 6. The research will explore the boys and their teacher's perception of the teaching and learning of writing. The aim of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the boys' thoughts and actions, complexities and struggles in relation to writing, in order to identify the barriers and supports that exist within the teaching and learning context of writing.

The study involves the following components:

- The participation of twelve boys in Year 5 and 6. This will be made up of 6 boys who are identified as 'below' the National Standard in writing from 2016 mid-year overall teacher judgement (OTJ) data and 4 boys who are identified as 'at' National Standard and 2 boys who are identified as 'above' National Standard at 2016 mid-year data.
- These boys will be observed in the classroom for two 30 minute observations during their writing sessions. Times will be negotiated with their classroom teachers.
- The boys will be asked to participate in two semi-structured individual interviews each session will be 15 minutes. There will also be two focus group interviews regarding their perceptions and experiences of writing. These two focus group interviews will be for the duration of 30 minutes each. These interviews will be audio taped and transcribed and will take place in the boys' classroom or library at a time negotiated with their teacher.
- The boys will be involved in 5 writing sessions as a means to explore their thoughts and perceptions of writing using journaling. These sessions will be conducted in class and will include activities similar to classroom writing lessons such as drawing, cartooning and writing about writing.
- The teachers will be asked to participate in two 30 minute individual semi-structured interviews about their writing programme including their perceptions and experiences of teaching 'at risk' male writers and their current classroom practice. These interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by myself.
- The teachers will be asked to take part in one 45 minute classroom observation during a writing lesson followed by a 20 minute debrief session at a time that suits them.

- There will be an initial meeting with you to organise an appropriate timeline.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your school from this study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, I will use my best endeavours to remove any of the information relating to your school from the project, including any final publication, provided that this remains practically achievable.

The boys participating in the research study will be able to be identified by other students. Therefore anonymity for the participants is not possible. This is due to the fact that some of the research activities take place in the classroom and because focus group interviews consist of a number of participants.

We seek assurance that participation in this study and any findings or results will have no implications on a teacher's standing or position within the school. We also seek your assurance that the decision of any students to participate or not to participate in the study will not affect his/her relationship with the school, nor will it affect his/her grades.

The results of the project will be published in my thesis and may also be disseminated via conference talks and journal articles, for example, I will do my best to ensure the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure confidentiality you will not be identified and pseudonyms will be used for all teachers, students and the school. Anonymity of all participants and confidentiality of data cannot be fully guaranteed due to the use of focus group interviews and in-class sessions with the students, but I will endeavour to minimise the risk by explaining to the students the importance of not repeating things said in the focus group interview and by co-constructing a confidentiality agreement with the children. All focus group interview transcripts will be read with the children and double checked with the researcher. Transcripts of the focus group interviews will not be sent home.

The information gathered from this study will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked office at Canterbury University, and will be only viewed by the supervisors and myself. The data will be destroyed after a five year period.

Please indicate to the researcher on the consent form if you would like a copy of the summary of results of the project. There is space on the consent form for you to provide your email address for that purpose.

The project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master in Education degree by Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 under the supervision of Jo Fletcher who can be contacted at [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) or phone: 03 364 2987 ext. 44284. She would be happy to discuss any concerns or answer any questions you may have about participation in this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))

If you agree to participate in the study, you are asked to complete the consent form and return this to Jenny Ward by 5<sup>th</sup> August in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

Jenny Ward

Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

**Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning  
and teaching of writing**



**Consent Form for Principal**

- ☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand what is required of the school if I agree to take part in the research.
- ☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and that the school may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.
- ☐ I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or the school. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- ☐ I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- ☐ I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- ☐ I understand that I am able to receive a report on the findings of the study by providing my email address in the space provided below.
- ☐ Participation in this study and any findings or results will have no implications on a teacher's standing or position within the school.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact the researcher Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 or supervisor Jo Fletcher 03 364 2987 ext. 44284 or [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))
- ☐ By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name:
Signed
Date:

Please write your email address here if you would like a copy of the report on this study:

---

Please return the completed consent form in the envelope provided to Jenny in the Ohope Beach school office asap or by 5<sup>th</sup> August at the latest.

## Appendix C: Information & Consent Form for Board of Trustees



Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

### **Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

#### INFORMATION SHEET FOR BOARD OF TRUSTEES

My name is Jenny Ward and I am a Masters student from the University of Canterbury College of Education, Health and Human Development department. I have been a primary school classroom teacher for 12 years and I am currently on study leave to conduct research into the perceptions and experiences of twelve male writers in Year 5 and 6. The research will explore the boys and their teacher's perception of the teaching and learning of writing. The aim of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the boys' thoughts and actions, complexities and struggles in relation to writing, in order to identify the barriers and supports that exist within the teaching and learning context of writing.

I am requesting your approval to approach some teaching staff and students at your school to invite them to be part of this study. This will involve the following components:

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male writers and their current classroom practice. These interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by myself.

- The teachers will be asked to take part in one 45 minute classroom observation during a writing lesson followed by a 20 minute debrief session at a time that suits them.
- There will be an initial meeting with you to organise an appropriate timeline.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your school from this study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, I will use my best endeavours to remove any of the information relating to your school from the project, including any final publication, provided that this remains practically achievable.

We seek assurance that participation in this study and any findings or results will have no implications on a teacher's standing or position within the school. We also seek your assurance that the decision of any students to participate or not to participate in the study will not affect his/her relationship with the school, nor will it affect his/her grades.

The results of the project will be published in my thesis and may also be disseminated via conference talks and journal articles, for example, I will do my best to ensure the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure confidentiality you will not be identified and pseudonyms will be used for all teachers, students and the school. Anonymity of all participants and confidentiality of data cannot be fully guaranteed due to the use of focus group interviews with the students, but I will endeavour to minimise the risk by explaining to the students the importance of not repeating things said in the focus group interview and by co-constructing a confidentiality agreement with the children.

The information gathered from this study will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked office at Canterbury University, and will be only viewed by the supervisors and myself. The data will be destroyed after a five year period.

Please indicate to the researcher on the consent form if you would like a copy of the summary of results of the project. There is space on the consent form for you to provide your email address for that purpose.

The project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master in Education degree by Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 under the supervision of Jo Fletcher who can be contacted at [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) or phone: 03 364 2987 ext. 44284. She would be happy to discuss any concerns or answer any questions you may have about participation in this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))

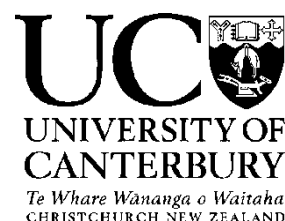
If you agree to participate in the study, you are asked to complete the consent form and return this to Jenny Ward by 5<sup>th</sup> August in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

Jenny Ward

Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development



Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

**Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

**Consent Form for Board of Trustees**

- ☐ We have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ We understand what is required of the school if we agree to take part in the research.
- ☐ We understand that participation is voluntary and that the school may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information we have provided should this remain practically achievable.
- ☐ We understand that any information or opinions we provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or the school. We understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- ☐ We understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- ☐ We understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- ☐ We understand that we are able to receive a report on the findings of the study by providing my email address in the space provided below.
- ☐ Participation in this study and any findings or results will have no implications on a teacher's standing or position within the school.
- ☐ We understand that we can contact the researcher Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 or supervisor Jo Fletcher 03 364 2987 ext. 44284 or [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If we have any complaints, we can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))
- ☐ By signing below, we agree to participate in this research project.

Name:
Signed
Date:



## **Appendix D: Information & Consent Form for Teachers**

Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

### **Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR TEACHERS**

My name is Jenny Ward and I am a Masters student from the University of Canterbury College of Education, Health and Human Development department. I have been a primary school classroom teacher for 12 years and I am currently on study leave to conduct research into the perceptions and experiences of twelve male writers in Year 5 and 6. The research will explore the boys and their teacher's perception of the learning and teaching of writing. The aim of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the boys' thoughts and actions, complexities and struggles in relation to writing, in order to identify the barriers and supports that exist within the teaching and learning context of writing.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. This will involve the following components:

- The participation of twelve boys in Year 5 and 6. This will be made up of 6 boys who are identified as 'below' the National Standard in writing from 2016 mid-year overall teacher judgement (OTJ) data and 4 boys who are identified as 'at' National Standard and 2 boys who are identified as 'above' National Standard at 2016 mid-year data.
- These boys will be observed in the classroom for two 30 minute observations during their writing sessions. Times will be negotiated with you.
- The boys will be asked to participate in two semi-structured individual interviews each session will be 15 minutes. There will also be two focus group interviews regarding their perceptions and experiences of writing. These two focus group interviews will be for the duration of 30 minutes each. These interviews will be audio taped and transcribed and will take place in the boys' classroom or library at a time negotiated with their teacher.
- The boys will be involved in 5 writing sessions as a means to explore their thoughts and perceptions of writing using journaling. These sessions will be conducted in class and will include activities similar to classroom writing lessons such as drawing, cartooning and writing about writing.
- You will be asked to participate in two 30 minute interviews about your writing programme including your perceptions and experiences of teaching 'at risk' male writers and your current classroom practice. These interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by myself.



- You will partake in a 45 minute classroom observation during a writing lesson followed by a 20 minute debrief session at a time suitable to you.
- There will be an initial meeting with you to organise an appropriate timeline.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your school from this study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, I will use my best endeavours to remove any of the information relating to your school from the project, including any final publication, provided that this remains practically achievable.

Your principal has given assurance that participation in this study and any findings or results will have no implications on a teacher's standing or position within the school. Your principal has also given assurance that the decision of any students to participate or not to participate in the study will not affect his/her relationship with the school, nor will it affect his/her grades.

Being part of this research study means that the boys will be able to be identified by other students. This is because some of the research takes place in the classroom and also because focus group interviews consist of a number of participants.

The results of the project will be published in my thesis and may also be disseminated via conference talks and journal articles, for example, I will do my best to ensure the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure confidentiality you will not be identified and pseudonyms will be used for all teachers, students and the school. Anonymity of all participants and confidentiality of data cannot be fully guaranteed due to the fact that it is a small school in a small community, but I will endeavour to minimise the risk by altering aspects of your description to make identification less likely.

The information gathered from this study will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked office at Canterbury University, and will be only viewed by the supervisors and myself. The data will be destroyed after a five year period. Please indicate to the researcher on the consent form if you would like a copy of the summary of results of the project. There is space on the consent form for you to provide your email address for that purpose.

The project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master in Education degree by Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 under the supervision of Jo Fletcher who can be contacted at [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) or phone: 03 364 2987 ext. 44284. She would be happy to discuss any concerns or answer any questions you may have about participation in this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))

Please return the completed consent form in the envelope provided to Jenny in the Ohope Beach school office asap or by 5<sup>th</sup> August at the latest.

Jenny Ward

Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development



Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

**Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

**Consent Form for Teachers**

- ☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand what is required of the school if I agree to take part in the research.
- ☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.
- ☐ I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or the school. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- ☐ I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- ☐ I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- ☐ I give an assurance that the decision of my students to participate or not participate in this research project will not affect their standing within the school or their grades.
- ☐ I understand that I am able to receive a report on the findings of the study by providing my email address in the space provided below.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact the researcher Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 or supervisor Jo Fletcher 03 364 2987 ext. 44284 or [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) or for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))
- ☐ By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name:

Signed

Date:

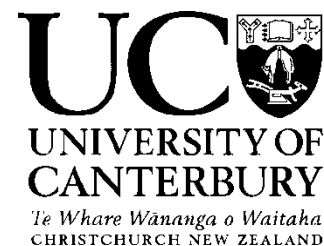
Please write your email address here if you would like a copy of the report on this study:

## Appendix E: Information & Consent Form for Children

Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development



Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

### **Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR CHILDREN**

My name is Jenny Ward and some of you know me as Ms Ward. I am studying for my Masters of Education degree at the University of Canterbury. I am doing a study to find out what do Year 5 and 6 boys think and feel about writing? I want to hear your thoughts, opinions and experiences of writing. If you agree to be part of my study, you will be doing the following things;

- I will interview you by yourself for two 15 minute interviews. These will be recorded. I will listen to the recording and write down what we said.
- I will interview you with a group of 5 other Year 5 and 6 boys to see what you all think about writing. These will be recorded. I will listen to the recording and write down what we said.
- I will also observe you twice during writing time for about 30 minutes each time and take some notes.
- During five of your 45 minute classroom writing sessions, you will also be part of a small writing group who will talk about writing, create visual pictures, and write in our journals. I will also be observing (watching and taking notes) your teachers during writing sessions.
- You will have an opportunity to read what you have said in the interviews and focus group interviews. The researcher (that's me) will be present when you read the focus group transcripts to listen to your feedback and make any changes to what has been said if necessary.
- Being part of this research study means you will be able to be identified by other students. This is because some of the research takes place in the classroom and also because focus group interviews consist of a number of participants.

Being part of this project is voluntary. It is your choice whether you agree to take part or not. You also have the right to withdraw (leave) from the project at any time and no-one will mind. You also have the right not to answer all the questions when I interview you. Everyone will be given a code name (pseudonyms) so that no-one will know your name, your teacher's name, or the school name. This means that the research is confidential or private information. The results of the project will be published in my thesis which will be in the University of Canterbury library. I will also give a brief report about my study to you and your parents when it is finished.

I have a letter and consent form to send home for them. If you have any questions about my study, you can ask your mum or dad or caregiver, or your teacher. They can contact me or my teacher at the university if they want to. My name is Jenny Ward and my phone number is 07 3124703. My supervisor is Jo Fletcher and her number is 03 364 2987 ext. 44284. She can also be contacted at [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz). If you agree to take part in my study, please fill in the consent form and return it to me by 5<sup>th</sup> August in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

Thank you  
Jenny Ward

Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016



**Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

**CONSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN**

I have discussed the research project with my parents/caregivers.

I am happy to be part of your research study on Year 5 and 6 boys and their thoughts and opinions about writing.

I understand what the project is about.

I know that the information collected about me will not be told to anyone else and will be stored away in a safe place. Jenny will also not use my name or my parent's/caregiver's/whanau or teacher's name or the name of our school.

All information will be destroyed after the project has been written up. My mum and dad/caregiver/whanau will receive a report of the project when it is finished, and I will also be given a copy. It will also be available at the University of Canterbury library.

I understand that I can change my mind about taking part in the project and no-one will mind.

I will have the opportunity to read what I have said.

I know if I have any questions I can ask my parents/caregivers/whanau or my teachers.

Child's Name:
Child's Signature
Date:

Please return the completed consent form in the envelope provided to Jenny in the Ohope Beach school office asap or by 5<sup>th</sup> August at the latest.

## **Appendix F: Information & Consent Form for Parents/Caregivers**



Telephone: 07 3124703

Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Department: College of Education, Health and Human Development

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016

### **Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT(S)/CAREGIVERS/WHANAU**

My name is Jenny Ward and I am a Masters student from the University of Canterbury College of Education, Health and Human Development department. I have been a primary school classroom teacher for 12 years and I am currently on study leave to conduct research into the perceptions and experiences of twelve male writers in Year 5 and 6. The research will explore the boys and their teacher's thoughts about the teaching and learning of writing. The aim of this research is to get a better understanding of the barriers and supports that exist within the teaching and learning of writing.

I would like to invite your child to take part in my study. This will involve the following components:

- The boys will be observed in the classroom for two 30 minute observations during their writing sessions. Times will be negotiated with their classroom teachers.
- The boys will be asked to participate in two semi-structured individual interviews each session will be 15 minutes. There will also be two focus group interviews regarding their perceptions and experiences of writing. These two focus group interviews will be for the duration of 30 minutes each. These interviews will be audio taped and transcribed and will take place in the boys' classroom or library at a time negotiated with their teacher. The boys will have an opportunity to read what they have said during the individual and focus group interviews. I will be present when they read the focus group transcripts in order to listen to their feedback and make any changes if necessary.
- The boys will be involved in five 45 minute writing sessions as a means to explore their ideas about writing using drawing, photographing samples, cartooning and writing about writing. These will happen in their class at writing time.
- Being part of this research study means that the boys will be able to be identified by other students. This is because some of the research takes place in the classroom and also because focus group interviews consist of a number of participants.

Participation is completely voluntary and if your child agrees to take part in the study they will have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. If they choose to withdraw, I will use my best endeavours to

remove any of the information relating to your child from the project, including any final publication, provided that this remains practically achievable.

The results of the project will be published in my thesis and may also be disseminated via conference talks and journal articles, for example, I will do my best to ensure the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your child's identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure confidentiality your child will not be identified and pseudonyms will be used for all teachers, students and the school. Anonymity of all participants and confidentiality of data cannot be fully guaranteed due to the use of focus group interviews and in-class sessions with the students, but I will endeavour to minimise the risk by explaining to the students the importance of not repeating things said in the focus group interview and by co-constructing a confidentiality agreement with the children. All focus group interview transcripts will be read with the children and double checked with the researcher. Transcripts of the focus group interviews will not be sent home.

The information gathered from this study will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked office at Canterbury University, and will be only viewed by the supervisors and myself. The data will be destroyed after a five year period.

Please indicate to the researcher on the consent form if you would like a copy of the summary of results of the project. There is space on the consent form for you to provide your email address for that purpose.

The project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master in Education degree by Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 under the supervision of Jo Fletcher who can be contacted at [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) or phone: 03 364 2987 ext. 44284. She would be happy to discuss any concerns or answer any questions you may have about participation in this project.

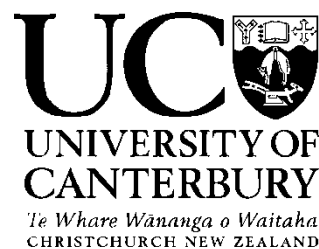
This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))

If you agree to participate in the study, you are asked to complete the consent form and return this to Jenny Ward by 5<sup>th</sup> August in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

Jenny Ward

Telephone: 07 3124703  
Email: [jhw35@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:jhw35@uclive.ac.nz)

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016



**Twelve Year 5 and 6 male writers and their teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learning and teaching of writing**

**Consent form for Parents**

- ☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand what is required of my child if he agrees to take part in the research.
- ☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and that he may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information he has provided should this remain practically achievable.
- ☐ I understand that any information or opinions my child provides will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or the school. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- ☐ I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- ☐ I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- ☐ I understand that I am able to receive a report on the findings of the study.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact the researcher Jenny Ward (07) 3124703 or supervisor Jo Fletcher 03 364 2987 ext. 44284 or [Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:Jo.fletcher@canterbury.ac.nz) or for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz))
- ☐ By signing below, I agree to my child participating in this research project.

Name:
Signed
Date:

Please write your email address here if you would like a copy of the report on this study:

---

Please return the completed consent form in the envelope provided to Jenny in the Ohope Beach school office asap or by 5<sup>th</sup> August at the latest.

## **Appendix G: Interview Questions for Boys**

What are your strengths as a writer?

What do you find hard about writing?

What types of writing do you enjoy most of all? Why do you like this type of writing?

What do you think good writing is?

What do your classmates think is good writing?

Can you tell me about a piece of writing you were particularly proud and why you were proud of this?

What type of writing does your teacher think is 'good' writing?

Can you tell me about a typical writing lesson?

What are some of the goals that you have for your writing?

Can you tell me about a time you have written with a buddy or in a group?



## **Appendix H: Interview Questions for Teachers**

Tell me about your teaching experience (history)

Tell me about a typical writing session?

What are your strengths as a teacher of writing?

What are your limitations as a teacher of writing?

Considering New Zealand national data and this school's own mid year data results why do you think boys lag behind?

What are your thoughts on boys and genre based writing?

Do you perceive there are gender differences in writing?


What do you see as the differences between high achieving writers-


Issue what do you think about the issue?

What do you think are some of the issues facing your 'at risk' male writers?

What do you think are some of the issues facing teachers of male writers?

## Appendix I: Two Stars and A Wish

 ~~matter~~ they used  
different words and used  
a plan to write this story

 he used different ideas  
for each page luckily they put  
a picture in so I know  
(Wish): Writing goals: what they look  
like  
to not use the same words  
and check and correct  
the spelling mistakes in  
the future and do not have to  
much stuff.

## Appendix J: John's Writing Exemplar

Start Writing Here

it was a lovely day at  
School but then things  
Started disapering All the  
chairs all the Tables and  
the pepole all the houses  
All the Sools it went  
back in time All that was  
left was my house my  
friends and me and my Dog  
and Shops and my friends  
family and my family  
and food and candy

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